

James Potter's Delivery Service for Runaway Blood Traitors

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Character:

[James Potter](#), [Sirius Black](#), [Remus Lupin](#), [Lily Evans Potter](#), [Peter Pettigrew](#), [Order of the Phoenix](#), [the Marauders](#), [Original Characters](#), [Marlene McKinnon](#), [Dorcas Meadows](#), [Mary Macdonald](#), [Regulus Black](#), [Severus Snape](#)

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James Potter's Delivery Service for Runaway Blood Traitors

by [wolfbuck \(paox\)](#).

Summary

Sirius Black is missing.

Notes

hello! this just my usual disclaimer: fuck jk rowling and her source material; if you agree with her or condone her actions in any way, this isn't for you and i don't want you to read it. i'm trans and this is a trans and gay story with trans and gay characters. it is, in addition, explicitly and implicitly anti-liberal centrism, and opposes the source material's political ideology emphatically. this is a political story about radical leftist rebellion against malignant bigotry and violent fascism. if you agreed with the politics presented in the original harry potter series, you will not enjoy this.

in addition, if you regularly consume or produce harry potter fan content and you're cisgender, especially if you aren't engaged with the transgender community or the reality of our struggles, this is my plea for you to donate to some transgender mutual aid funds and charities! the world gets more dangerous for us every day and we need help. don't bury your head in the sand -- we need you! there is no ethical consumption under capitalism, but we can all strive to be more ethical individually, and more importantly, we all can (and must) help each other.

here's my second disclaimer; i've had to add this retroactively. **this is a wolfstarbucks fanfiction. james, sirius and remus are in a polyamorous relationship, which is explored throughout.** this isn't a romance where genre is concerned, fitting far more firmly into dystopia/mystery/adventure, but the boys' dynamic is one of the most prominent through-lines of characterisation in the whole story, and it is present from the first chapter to the last one. this can't be read as 'platonic prongsfoot'. they are explicitly in a relationship. when reading poly content, claiming that you want to 'take out' a character in order to make the work in question read as monogamous isn't just poor media comprehension; it's hurtful. wolfstarbucks is the first relationship tag up in the description but, despite being as clear as possible that this is the case, i have recieved quite a bit of pushback and harassment about my decision to include this ship from people who apparently didn't know what this fic was before they read it.

here's my final word on the matter: ship what you'd like, but please know that treating poly relationships in fandom spaces as incomprehensible and disgusting is cruel and mean-spirited. if you don't like this, move on. not every fanwork you dislike has to be problematic; you are allowed to give things a pass. critique and discussion are vital to all online spaces, but harassment, cruelty and closed-mindedness aren't helping anybody, and i've grown quite exhausted over the backlash this work has received despite its relatively small size. disliking ships is fine. making fandom a restrictive, homogeneous space in which no variety in interpretation is permitted through vagueposting, anon hate, hatereading, subtweets, insulting comments and the inclusion of my works/presence in hate

forums/blogs is not okay. if anything in my works is tangibly harmful, problematic or pernicious, tell me. i want to learn. if you want me to leave because my content does not align with your own interpretation of these characters, i'm sincerely sorry to have upset you or made you uncomfortable, but i'm not going anywhere.

MESSAGES

Chapter Notes

GENERAL WARNINGS FOR THE WHOLE FIC:

horror elements, including distressing or upsetting imagery, description and allegory; unhealthy/codependent relationship dynamics, emotional abuse, grooming taking place from an adult to a minor (emotional and psychological, non-sexual/non-romantic; functionally it's grooming into a lifestyle rather than into a relationship), physical abuse; physical injury, violence (including towards minors), gun violence, fantasy/magical violence, blood, body horror, chronic illness, fantasy/magical injury, mental illness (depression, acute trauma, post-traumatic stress, suicidal ideation, anxiety, panic attacks, trauma-related mood dysregulation, trauma-related aggression, paranoia, flashbacks, nightmares), grief, mourning, romantic separation, abandonment issues, trust issues; fascism, fascist violence, fascist allegory, real-world politics and political commentary, dark political humour, bigotry, discrimination (multiple characters are of intersecting marginalised identities, and this affects their lives and perspectives; while this is not a story about bigotry, it does not shy away from depicting it and its effects), fantasy/magical discrimination (this also actively affects characters' perspectives, beliefs and experiences, and is depicted extensively, with real-world allegory); death (often violent), including primary character death (note: this is extended cast, including over eight point-of-view characters; all of them are primary characters).

this work does not depict any graphic sexual content, nor does it allude to sexual activity involving primary characters, who are minors for the majority of the story. however, it does include some instances of immature or sexual humour and language. additionally, if you're looking for something canon-compliant, this is not the fic for you. this work's worldbuilding is unwieldy, its story is expansive, and it does not take strides to comply to a source material that i do not respect or particularly like. moreover, this story is not fanon-compliant in any way, and does not take strides to comply to a marauders-era fanon that, likewise, i have little affection for. these characters are products of my own creative interpretation, and while constructive critique is fine, harassment for perceived transgression against a unified, mandatory fanon is not something i will put up with.

despite being a work that deals with heavy themes, there is a lot of levity to this fic. it is ultimately a story about love. i hope it brings you some joy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

PART ONE - RISING

Pads,

Happy Summer Holidays! I know we've got the mirrors, but writing letters is nice, too. I feel like I'm leaving you out when I just write to Moony and Wormtail, and plus, I think Bullet likes delivering letters to London.

How are you surviving so far? Haven't managed to get you to pick up my mirror-calls since we left the platform as of writing this, you twat, so next time, answer me. It's great

here. My dad got me a new broom and the dementors recently moved a few towns down. They do that every few months, migrating a little further inland. Makes you wonder what you-know-who is telling them to do. Maybe they're just meant to spook people. That sounds like him, doesn't it?

So anyway, I can fly a lot now, and pretty far out, too, so that's what I'm doing with my time for the most part. My dad's busier and busier at the ministry, and mum's out a lot, too, though she won't tell me where she goes. I figure it's something that'll slip out eventually. It's weird though, isn't it? How secretive everybody gets. That's war, I guess. Knowing your family, they're scheming like nothing else, right? I bet they're plotting my murder right now as we speak. Luckily, you're pretty good at eavesdropping, so hopefully they won't get me down just yet.

My wrist is cramping up, mate. Write me back if your mirror's broken, okay? I'm not worried but it's boring out here on my own. We'd love for you to come over sometime.

Yours,

Prongs.

Pads,

It's been two weeks, mate. It's not really funny anymore.

Did you really break your mirror? Usually I can see the inside of your back pocket when I call and you don't pick up, or your bedroom ceiling, but I haven't seen anything through it in ages. Since before the end of term, I think.

Just my own (admittedly very handsome) face. If this is a joke, I'm not laughing. I mean, it's funny. But also, stop.

Moony came over the other day. He hates flying -- says it makes him feel sick -- so we went down to the lake and swam all afternoon, 'til he saw some big fish in the water and got spooked. He says hi. Apparently he's been sending you letters too. Did you get them? He said he hasn't gotten an answer, either.

Peter says hello, too. He's got a part time job at a muggle shop on his mum's street, so he's busy a lot, but he hopes you're okay, which is about as much as you can get out of him on a good day, so take it.

Please write back. Seriously. No pun intended.

Yours,

Prongs.

Pads,

Thought I'd give it a good long break after the last letter, shake some sense into you, y'know? Make you worried like I am, you git.

Didn't work, apparently. Happy July! And happy one-month-out-of-school. I'm really bloody stressed about you right now. I almost floored to your house the other day, but my wand isn't keyed into it, so I probably would've gotten stranded somewhere in the floo network because of your damn wards.

Dad told mum to tell me to tell you that if you need to get out of there, you can stay with us. He'll deal with the legal stuff, too, he said, though between you and me, I think he's not too eager to get into it with the Blacks. He wishes you his best, though, and mum's worried about you, too. Remus and Peter both say you haven't replied to any of their letters, either. Remus is really put out about it, really stressed. If this makes him any more worried than usual I think he might just explode.

I keep remembering the beginning of second year, that huge bruise on the back of your neck that didn't go away for months. Dark magic, wasn't it? It couldn't have been natural. I think you thought I didn't see it, but I did. I saw a lot of things you didn't want me to see.

I'm worried. I don't know what you've gotten into your head, if you think we're better off without you or whatever, but fucking write back, please? Please.

You know the drill. One call -- one owl -- just give me the heads up and I'll fly to London to get you. I'd go anywhere.

Yours,

Prongs.

Pads,

Lily Evans came over the other day, took the muggle bus to Godric's Hollow. She said it was just to review the transfig homework, because she knows I'm the best in the year and she didn't have access to any sources for the essay, but I think she's finally coming around, you know that? She

smiled at me a few times, Padfoot! Properly smiled! What a win!

When I told her about you, she wasn't worried. I think she thinks I'm blowing it out of proportion. I guess she might be right -- you are a bit of a drama queen at the best of times -- but she doesn't know you like I do, and I'm worried, really worried, more worried by the day, and she seemed to understand that. She sends you her best wishes. She said if you're not back for the school year, she'll help us find you.

It's been almost two months. I keep writing letters and screwing them up and throwing them away, because it feels a lot less like chatting and a lot more like survival. I'm scared I'll say the wrong thing and it'll be the last bloody thing of mine you ever read. I don't want my last words to you to be me telling you I think you're a right prick and you smell bad.

I've considered that they might be reading your mail, intercepting your letters back to me. If they are, I guess I've embarrassed myself, haven't I? Being so bloody concerned.

If you can, please write back.

Yours,

Prongs.

Pads,

Did you get Dumbledore's letter? Or did your family not let you read it?

On the off-chance you get a hold of this and not that: Dumbledore sent out a letter to all returning students about the new school year. Apparently there's gonna be 'new security measures in place for the foreseeable future', because he's worried about death eaters and the like. My parents are fretting about it already. I don't blame them. Things are getting really bloody scary out there.

I can't wait to see you again. Only a month to go! I don't know what to write anymore.

Please just fucking stay safe. Promise me you will.

Yours,

Prongs.

Pads,

My mother broke down and told me what she's been doing today. Apparently, she's been out helping to form a group of witches to build overseas safehouses for muggleborn kids, just in case things get ugly, which she thinks they will. Safehouses for muggleborns, Sirius. What the hell? The world is going loopy.

The ministry seems very quiet. All the reports about disappearances and murders are sliding to the back page of the Prophet. I'm worried. Really worried. My dad thinks he might lose his job, too. Personally, I'm not so sure, because anybody with two eyes can see he's amazing at what he does, but...

Anyway. Apart from all that, you're pretty much all I think about nowadays. I've sort of come to terms with the fact

that you're probably in a rough situation right now. I wish the world would stop doing that. Putting my best friend between a rock and a hard place and... it seems like you've been through too much bullshit for one person, y'know? I don't need to tell you that. I think you're very, very aware. I keep fucking thinking about that bruise, Sirius, second year, dark on the back of your neck as you got changed in the boys' dorm. I can't stop seeing it in my head.

Evans came over again. She's worried, too. About herself, about the world, and about you. She seemed like she meant it when she told me to send you her best, so.

Running out of space. I love you, mate. I love you.

Yours,

Prongs.

Pads,

Need anything from Diagon Alley? I'm doing Evans' shopping for her for the new school year, too, because she's anxious about going into wizarding London right now, and Peter's as well. Remus is coming with me. He's fretting about you, so I guess I'm going to have to put up with that all day.

Being in London is gonna suck. Being so close and yet so far, I guess.

Write back, we go tomorrow!

Yours,

Prongs.

Pads,

I got extras of all my books. It's OWL year, and I don't want you failing! If by some miracle you've got your own and you're fine when we get there for the year, then... well. We've got spares.

Only five more days. Then, this stupid, horrible summer is over. Just keep thinking about it, okay? How soon it is.

Yours,

Prongs.

Pads,

We leave for the Hogwarts Express tomorrow morning, and it's already midnight, so I don't know if my owl will get this to you in time. Guess that's fine. You don't really need to read this, I just gotta get it off my chest.

I hadn't really realised how shit everything is without you. How much it all sucks when you're not there. But this summer was horrible, Sirius. And not just because I spent the whole time worried about you and Evans and the war and my parents. It was shit because I did all of that and you weren't there to do it with me.

I don't really know what it all means. The stuff I've realised I'm feeling. It'll probably be super bloody awkward in the dorm again, if you're there, but y'know what, I think we'll

be okay. And I think Remus feels the same, if that's any consolation. I think he gets on your last nerve a little less than I do.

I don't ever want you to go back to that house, okay? Next summer you'll be sixteen, and you can come home with me, and it's all gonna be perfect. My parents love you even more than they love me, and that's saying something, and Peter and Remus and Evans can come over, and everything's gonna be fine, even with the war.

I hate worrying about you. I hate not knowing if you're okay. It's horrible.

We all love you. I love you.

Yours,

Prongs.

Remus finds him on the platform, snaring James' wrist as he appears through the steam. "James!"

"Moony!" James drags him in for a short, fierce hug.
"Missed you, mate."

"You saw me last week." Nonetheless, Remus grabs the back of his jacket and squeezes back. "Come on, my parents already left. Most of the good compartments are still empty, I think—"

They crowd onto the train together, trunks scraping together as they haul them aboard. In the frontmost carriage, they find an empty compartment and collapse inside, shoving their trunks into the overhead storage.

James takes the left window seat and Remus takes the right one.

"You haven't seen him yet?" James asks immediately.

Remus shakes his head, peering out over the platform. "You neither?"

James shakes his head. "No, nothing. Haven't heard anything, still." He doesn't mention last night's letter. There will be time for that later.

"I wonder if he knows how much he worries us," Remus asks absently, more rhetorical than anything. "Bet he'd be delighted if he saw the state of us."

"I'm sure." James sits back in his seat, folding his arms over his stomach. "Damn it all. He's not gonna turn up."

"Don't lose hope yet."

But James already knows it. Dread and resignation wage a war in the bottom of his stomach. He feels nauseous.

The compartment door slides open and Peter shuffles in, round face bright with happiness. "James, Remus!"

James gets up to give him a tight hug. "Missed you, mate."

Peter beams up at him as Remus takes his trunk. Then, just as quickly, his face falls. "I haven't heard anything either, before you ask. Nothing."

"Shit."

"Yeah." Peter takes a seat next to Remus, watching the platform. "We've still got ten minutes until the train leaves, though."

Tense, ugly silence falls. After some time, Lily Evans joins them, and James feels so sick he doesn't even have it in him to compliment her as she shuffles into the seat beside him, looking out over the platform, long hair in plaits.

"Nothing?" she asks Remus. "From Black, I mean."

Remus shakes his head. "Nobody's seen him, and there's still been no response to any of us."

"Oh." Lily stares down at the tabletop between them all. "I expected he'd give up the ghost by now."

"We're pretty sure it isn't a prank."

Lily nods solemnly. "I'm starting to agree. I'll stay here with you all until the train leaves, anyway."

They slip back into silence, all of them looking out of the window with intent. Excited first years and worried parents, and a hoard of Hufflepuffs with broomsticks, and a cluster of tired-looking seventh years. No Sirius Black.

When the train jolts under them, whistling loudly from the front carriage, Lily stands up.

"I'm sorry about your friend," she says awkwardly. "Bye, Potter."

"Bye," James says, not looking away from the window because he thinks he couldn't muster a smile if he tried.

She pulls her trunk upright and leaves, the door sliding closed behind her as she treks off to find Snape, probably. The platform begins to move out from under them, dragged away as the train moves off, and the platform becomes a blur of waving parents and white steam.

And no Sirius.

"I'll start checking through the train," Peter offers, slipping out. Remus follows him, squeezing James' arm on the way out.

James probably should, too, but he feels far too sick, and he already knows everything he needs to know.

Sirius Black is not returning for this year.

No Sirius all through the train ride. No Sirius as they make their way into the Great Hall. No Sirius at the feast. Five or six people ask James where his friend Black is all through the evening, despite how valiantly Remus and Peter try to fend off wonderers. James can't even enjoy the food, despite how hungry he is, because his stomach is in knots and all he wants to do is lie down and rest his aching head.

Even a few teachers seem to be casting their incomplete little group more glances than usual. James catches McGonagall staring at him halfway through dessert. He stares right back until she looks away.

The journey up to Gryffindor Tower feels like it takes years. Other Gryffindors give the three of them some space in the common room, murmuring. James pounds up the boys' staircase to the fifth years' dorm, then pauses, hand on the knob.

Let him be in there. Let him be in there.

Seeming to sense that James doesn't really have the strength for it, Remus pushes the door open, hand on his own. Inside, three beds are lined up against the wall.

Pads,

Dumbledore won't tell us what happened. I marched up to his office on the first night back, when we saw they got rid of your bed, and he said it's 'private family business, unfortunately, so as much as he'd like to tell us what's happening, he is currently unable to give us any answers'. Bullshit. All I know is you're not a Hogwarts Student anymore, and I miss you. What the fuck, I miss you. I miss you so much. It's been two weeks and I think I'm gonna implode because there's this huge you-shaped hole in my life and I can't stand it.

I don't know how everything can feel so WRONG all at once. Classes feel wrong, pranks feel wrong, quidditch feels wrong. Everything sucks and I'm tired. Even Evans seems sorry for me, and I can't even do anything because every time I try to flirt with her, I just end up thinking about you and I get sad. I started crying in front of her the other day, I've never been more embarrassed in my life. I think Remus is getting very bloody sick of dealing with me. But I don't feel whole without you.

Bullet seems to think you're still at Hogwarts. He gets confused about how to find you, but every letter I give him he eventually flies off with - south, London maybe - and he comes back without, so somebody must be receiving them. It's like you've dropped off the face of the planet, Padfoot. Nobody knows anything.

Regulus isn't back, either. Took me a while to confirm that, but he's missing as well, and Dumbledore won't tell me anything about that, either. I wrote to dad about it and he doesn't know anything, either. Your father is still attending ministry events, still going to work. Your mother hasn't

been seen, but that's nothing new. They're carrying on their lives as normal and you're gone. What parents do that?

I swear we'll find you. I'm not giving up on you. None of us are.

Stay safe. Stay alive. We love you.

Yours,

Prongs.

The first month is spent in a mourning, grief-fuelled haze. Everything aches and the nights feel too long now that they're not full of Sirius. James spends a lot of time sleeping. Remus writes his essays for him. Peter hovers. Lily tries to snap him out of it and it doesn't work.

Even the teachers seem a little sorry for him, though McGonagall makes an effort to make it clear she's an unbiased adjudicator and won't be handing out easy O's. She holds James back after a class to ask if he's alright in the first week. Numb like a zombie, James tells her he's fine, and that's the end of that.

Days blur together. It gets colder and colder as autumn sets in. Sirius doesn't reply to any of his letters, still.

Outside the walls of their castle, the state of the world is getting worse, and maybe that's what snaps James out of it - when the Prophet arrives one morning in October and the front page is loud and bold with a headline about some murdered muggleborn. He stares at the page for an inscrutable amount of time and then looks up. Teary-eyed, Lily looks back at him from across the table, and it hits

James that this is war. That this is how war feels -- this, staring at the paper and wondering how the murdered stranger felt as they stared down the end of a wand and prayed for mercy.

Lily stands up, chair screeching on the floor, rushing out. James follows her.

"I want to help," he tells her, when he finally tracks her down to an empty classroom on the west side of the castle, fourth floor. Facing away from the rising sun.

Lily's got her arms tucked around her chest, head ducked down where she's sitting atop one of the desks. Her legs are swinging a little.

"I want to help," James repeats, and crosses the room to sit opposite her, on a desk by the window. "I don't know how, but I want to."

She wipes her eyes hurriedly. "Potter, I really can't put up with it today, so just... just try again tomorrow--"

"It's not about that." James clears his throat. "This war has already taken a friend from me. I don't want it to take anybody else."

Lily looks up at him through her fringe. "You really think Black's missing? Properly missing?"

James swallows and says the hardest set of words he's ever had to say. "I think he might be dead."

She stills. "I'm sorry."

"Me too." James scrubs at his face with both hands. "I miss him. So much."

Lily doesn't seem to know what to say.

"It hurts. All the time. It really fucking sucks. But I'm trying to be better."

"Right."

"So I want to start again."

Lily doesn't trust it. James can see by the look on her face. A part of her wants to blame her and another part doesn't, but the loudest part is too tired to do much more than sit there in the shadow of the war and wait for her to reply.

"We can do some stuff," Lily offers eventually. "I know some people who think they're going to end up fighting in this war, one way or another. People like me who need to know how to defend themselves."

"Okay."

"We can..." Her eyes brighten ever so slightly. She forces a smile. "We can try."

Pads,

Your disappearance hurt everyone. I think even Gryffindors who didn't know you feel your absence. They hate it as much as I do, the idea that our friends are disappearing before our eyes. Most of them figured out you didn't get on with your family. I think they fear the worst, and it makes everybody so hopeless.

So we're going to try to do something about it. Lily's agreed to help us start a little... duelling club -- just people we know we can trust, so we're doing it privately. Without

teachers knowing, y'know? Because they wouldn't let us pick and choose who we include. Lily, Remus and I are going to run it together, and we've got a few older Gryffindors' blessings.

Anyway, we don't have a name for it yet, but we had our first meeting last week, in the Gryffindor Prefects' meeting room on the third floor. It was a tight fit, since there's about twenty of us. Mostly Gryffindors, though we've got a few puffs too, and two Ravenclaws and one Slytherin. We did healing spells, which Remus is bloody amazing at, and I think it helps people. Feeling less hopeless y'know. Next week, Lily's going to start teaching potions. She wants everybody to know how to whip up a basic pain relief draft and something offensive, too -- something you can chuck that'll explode on impact, or burn or something like that -- and after that, she wants to get onto the more complicated stuff.

I still think of you all the time. Remus says he's got a plan to find you, but he won't tell me what it is yet. Peter's gotten all distant on us. I think the realisation that we're really at war has freaked him out a little bit.

I love you. I love you. I love you.

Yours,

Prongs.

Slughorn doesn't like fighting in his classroom, so the natural solution is to fight very, very quietly. James has got years of experience in this arena, but he's also been staying up until three every night with Remus for the past week, scouring old ministry case files for anything that might help

them with Sirius, so he's not really in the mood for fighting right now.

Unfortunately, Rosier and Wilkes seem to have other ideas. James dodges three jellylegs jinxes in the first half hour of the class, and after that it seems to die down a little. James praises himself for not reacting. Through the purple haze that has consumed the classroom, Lily shoots him an approving look over her cauldron.

In the final ten minutes, however, Wilkes seems to decide to give up the ghost. James is halfway through ladling his finished iron-replenishing potion into a stoppered glass when the Slytherin mutters, from behind him, "Relashio!"

James' hand unfurls, fingers crunching backwards, and the ladle tips over, spilling hot potion over his robes and staining them bright white in a streak. Laughter blooms through the classroom like flowers, but the man-eating type that could strangle you if they wanted. James' face burns.

"Ah, Mr. Potter," Slughorn laughs jovially, burbling his way over. "Had a little accident, have we? No trouble, no trouble at all, my boy, it appears there's no harm done—"

James scowls over his shoulder at Wilkes. *I'll get you for that one*, he wants to say, but then he remembers Lily and his promise, and he shuts his mouth.

"Congratulations on holding your tongue there," Remus says mildly at the end of the lesson, as the two of them pack away their things. "If we hurry, we should be able to grab you a spare change of robes before Charms. You up for it?"

"Of course," James says, though all he really wants to do is lie down and sleep off his headache. "Yeah, Remus. Let's go."

They're halfway out the door when Rosier calls after them.

"Bet Black would've fought back!"

James feels himself go very still like he isn't fully in control of his body. Remus' hand steadies him and he just stands there in the doorway for a second, trying to remember how to breathe.

"What did you just say?" he asks eventually, turning around and stalking back to Rosier.

His smug little face doesn't change. "I said, I bet Black would've fought back. Guess he couldn't now, could he?" He leans in close. "I heard they snapped his wand, Potter, I bet he's pretty bloody pathetic now-"

James goes to lunge across the desk. Remus and Peter barely manage to hold him back.

"Don't you dare talk about him!" James shouts. "Don't you fucking dare-"

"James- James!" Remus hisses into his ear. "James, it's not worth it. Come on, let's just go-"

"He knows where he is! Let go of me-"

Rosier holds his hands up, grinning. "I don't know what you're talking about, Potter. Come, Wilkes, we've got a class to get to."

Pads,

Did they take your wand? Rosier knows something, he let slip in potions and I wrote as quickly as I could. He said

they snapped it. Your wand, I mean. He sounded like he meant it.

Who's 'they'?

I don't know why I keep writing. I fucking hate this and I'm starting to forget what your stupid face looks like.

Yours always,

Prongs.

James leads his first week of instruction at their club at the beginning of November. Most of them have some experience with duelling, but only in formal settings. He wants to fix that.

"Okay," he says, at the beginning of their session. All eyes turn to him. "Today, we're gonna be duelling. I'll be leading the session-

There are scattered laughs. James clears his throat and pushes on. He still feels mildly mediocre, but the last few weeks have been crammed with research, and he grips his new sword of knowledge like a very inexperienced, sweaty-palmed knight.

"I'll be leading the session," he continues, a little too confident for how he feels. "And today, I want to teach the best techniques for duelling on the fly. Uh, holding your own in a wandfight without any warning. No bowing, no rules. How to get the upper hand and escape if you're cornered."

The group looks slightly more interested at that. From the front row, Remus grins at him.

“So.” James clears his throat. “For this session, we’re gonna be laying the groundwork for the spells we’ll be working with. There are three main jinxes I want everybody able to perform by the end of the night, even if it’s not very powerful yet.”

Beside him, Lily flips their stolen blackboard over, revealing each incantation for the impending, knockback and tripping jinxes: *impedimenta*, *flipendo*, *itinerata*.

“This’ll be basic stuff for some of you,” James instructs, and wipes a sweaty hand on his trousers. “But I want you to practice anyway -- get used to casting quickly and forcefully. Like this.” He jabs his wand at Remus, hard, snapping, “*Flipendo!*”

Remus goes tumbling out of his chair and half the room jumps. James burns with pride, feeling like a first year for the first time in a while. The last time he felt sure of the way people see him was when Sirius was still here. A tinge of familiar, prideful vindication lashes up inside of him.

“Merlin, James,” Remus grunts, tugging himself back into his chair. “Got some anger to get out?”

“Always,” James confirms gravely, and tries his best to make it sound like a joke. “So, find somebody from your year -- gender doesn’t matter, nor does build or anything like that, just somebody you’re not in an argument with or anything, someone who can take a hit from you, and try not to hold back. None of these should be lethal so long as you’re not mangling the incantations that badly. Let’s get going.”

Everybody gets up, pushing their chairs to the back of the room and splitting off into pairs to start practicing. James slumps against the wall, mildly out of breath.

"You were good," Lily compliments him. "Less full of yourself than usual."

"Thanks," James says, though he wants to say, *it's really hard to be full of myself right now, not when he's not here to laugh at my stupid jokes, and a part of me still wants to be the best person in the room, but it doesn't bloody matter much anymore, not when my friends are dying.*

He says none of that. Lily smiles tentatively at the ground, then partners off with Remus, leaving James to wander around giving critiques to people's form and wrist movement, straining to remember everything from *The Intermediary Guide To Offensive Jinxes*.

The session passes quickly. By the end, almost everybody has got a pretty good grip on each of the jinxes, and James promises that in their next session, he'll get onto the good stuff.

"It's badass, I promise," he says, not sure he's getting the word usage right. He heard it in one of Sirius' favourite muggle movies last summer. The thought of it makes his heart hurt. "But that's for next time. For now, clear off, before McGonagall finds us and murder us all."

The group filters out. A Ravenclaw James doesn't know very well -- Elias something-or-other -- stops to tell him he's glad they're doing this.

"After your friend disappeared, I think it hit me that this is really happening," Elias tells him. "So... thanks. This makes it all feel a little less scary."

"No problem." James smiles faintly.

"Any news on him at all?"

“Nothing.” Remus takes the reins. “We’ve still got hope, though.”

Have we? James wants to ask, but he manages to bite his tongue. “Yeah. Yeah, we do.”

“Good. That’s the spirit.” Elias grins. “I didn’t know him very well, but I hope he’s alright, wherever he is.”

Everything aches. James sort of wants to lie down and never get up. “Yeah.”

Elias seems to realise it’s a painful subject, because he nods to each of them and then shuffles off, making himself scarce as he heads west towards Ravenclaw Tower. Remus squeezes James’ arm in his hand.

“You okay?” he asks.

James forces a nod. “The name,” he says. “For the club. It should be... something for him.”

“The Black Brigade?” Lily suggests from where she’s wiping down the blackboard, sarcasm laden heavy on her tongue.

Even Remus grimaces. “He’d hate that.”

James considers. “Something more like him. Sirius’... something.”

“Sirius’ squad?” Remus offers.

“That’s horrendous,” Lily says flatly.

“Padfoot’s Regiment,” James tries, tasting the words on his tongue. “Padfoot’s...”

“Padfoot’s Army?” Remus tries.

Army. It feels solid. Real. Like something that'll last. Not much in the world feels like it'll last right now.

"Perfect," James says. "Padfoot's Army."

Pads,

We named it after you. 'Padfoot's Army', we're calling it. The group of us who are learning to fight. Everybody seems to like it well enough. We know it's not literally for you, it's for all of us, but if you hadn't gone missing, I think most of us would have kept ignoring the war until the end of school.

I taught my first lesson the other day! It was amazing. I think people actually listened to me. A year ago, you would have laughed at me for doubting they would, but a lot's changed, so... I don't know. I'm glad they took me seriously. No pun intended.

We're still trying. Still not giving up hope. Someday I'm gonna see you again, if it's the last thing I do. I swear it.

Hang on for me. And for Remus. And for Peter. And for Lily.

Yours forever,

Prongs.

As the Christmas holidays near, Remus finally reveals what he's been working on.

"It's... it's nothing special," he warns. "And I'm sure they've got wards against forgery, so I've been researching spells to bypass them, but..."

He trails off. Then, he shuffles the parchment in his hands over to James carefully.

James picks it up, forcing himself to be delicate with it. It's pristine, expensive stuff, pure white and faintly scented. It's already written on, but the hand looks nothing like Remus'.

Dear Walburga,

How long it has been since we've last spoken! My family offers you their sincerest well-wishes, especially in light of recent events. I won't keep you too long, as I know that things are rather busy at the Black residence, but Narcissa was eager to get in contact; she does so miss you all, and waits in eager anticipation for our Christmas do, I'm sure, as do all of us. Your dinner parties are truly beautiful.

Communication has been rather stilted for us as of late -- not in the least due to the fact that my position at the ministry often eats up my time -- so it's been rather difficult to ascertain the situation regarding your sons. If we can offer any support to you during these changing times, please do not hesitate to reach out. Family is of immense importance to me, as I'm sure you know, and if I can do anything to ease this stressful process, I would like to fulfil that privilege to the utmost extent.

Yours faithfully,

Lucius Abraxas Malfoy III

"You," James says, looking up after a long pause, "Are a maniac, Lupin. You know that, right?"

Remus stares at him. "You don't think it'll work?"

"I don't know." James tries very hard not to smile and fails miserably. "But it's the best thing we've come up with yet. God, you genius."

"I'm going to take Bullet to send it," Remus clarifies. "And he's smart, he'll listen if we instruct him to bring the response back to us, not to Malfoy himself. And he looks expensive, too, like a proper pureblood owl. At the very least, they shouldn't be able to track it back to us, right?"

James grabs his shoulders. "You're the best person I know."

Remus smiles weakly. "I know."

"And I... I think this might work. I really do think this might work. You've thought it all through so much-"

Remus shrugs off the praise. "Sirius used to read me letters from his family. They were formal like that... y'know. In that weird, underhanded way where they won't say things directly. I just did my best to copy those."

"And your best is amazing. Truly. You're a genius."

"Then let's hope I'm genius enough to succeed." Remus takes the letter back very gently, like it's made of glass. "You have no idea how expensive the parchment was, by the way. I had to take out a mortgage to get it."

"I'll pay you back."

"I was joking. I'm fine."

James shakes his head, grinning properly now. "I'm gonna be paying you back for the rest of my life."

They send off the letter that evening, by nightfall so it'll be harder to track if anybody tries. James watches Bullet vanish into the blue midnight, stares after the tiny owl until he's a speck against the sky. Peter's already asleep. Remus hovers by his shoulder and watches, too.

"Merlin, I hope this works," James murmurs. "I hope to god it works."

It was Sirius' birthday the other day. Neither of them mentioned it at the time, presumably because it feels less like it should be celebrated and more like the wake of an awkward funeral.

Remus says it now, though. "We'll have him back before his next birthday. I promise."

James snares his hand. "I hope you're right."

"I'm always right."

"Of course."

They carry on watching the sky for a while. Sometimes, James thinks that'll be how Sirius comes back -- swooping over the horizon by broom, dark hair blowing back off his face, grinning like a maniac, shoulders thrown back like a returning war hero.

But Sirius doesn't appear. Not then and not the next night, either, when their Padfoot's Army meeting runs late, Lily passing around handmade leaflets of different common potions ingredients that react violently with one another, useable as flammable or explosive weapons if one is in a hurry.

“Next week, we’re going to try brewing shelf-stable flammables,” she calls out over the milling crowd as the meeting draws to a close. “The type you can light on fire and throw. Like magical Molotov Cocktails.”

Nobody seems to know what those are, and scattered laughter ripples through the room. James grins at Lily fiercely. A little startled, she smiles back, and then turns away to watch their attendees file out.

When it’s just the three of them left, Remus and James sit down to tell Lily the most recent development in their plan.

“That was stupid,” Lily says almost immediately. “Really stupid.”

“We’re aware,” Remus sighs. “But we’re willing to do it.”

“And if they track it back to you?”

“They won’t-” Remus starts.

“If they do,” James cuts in, “I’m gonna take the blame. What can they do to me? I’m fifteen.”

“And you’re from a wealthy family,” Lily adds, vaguely derisive.

James winces. “Right. That too. They’d, uh, be way worse to you or Remus.”

Lily furrows her brow. “Isn’t Lupin a pureblood?”

Remus kicks James under the table. “Blood traitors,” he tells Lily. “My family. I mean.”

“Right.”

Awkward silence falls for a while. Eventually, after seeming to bite her tongue for a while, Lily looks up again, scanning both of their faces.

"If this is a thrill to you," she says, mostly to James, "I think we should just end it now."

That came out of nowhere. James says as much.

"I know." Lily looks back down at her hands. "I was talking to Sev the other day-- I know you hate him, don't look at me like that. He thinks you're only doing this because playing revolutionary gives you... a thrill. A kick."

James scoffs. "He's a blood purist."

"You can't--" Lily cuts herself off, seeming to realise she's not going to win this argument. "I'm not saying I believe him. I just know it wouldn't be out of character for you, Potter. Not after all this time."

I've matured, James wants to say, but that would be a lie and he knows it. *I'm tired* would be closer to the truth, but it feels a little too pathetic.

"I don't know," he says truthfully. "A part of me likes it. Leading something. Teaching people."

"I thought as much."

"But if I don't do anything, he's going to die out there, and even..." James swallows and forces out the next words. "Even if he's already dead, he'll stay unavenged. And I can't let that happen."

Lily looks him up and down. "You really care about Black, huh?"

“So much,” James admits, the words escaping like water through a dam. “So fucking much.”

Hesitation. Then, Lily leans in close. “Then take this seriously, and we won’t lose anybody else.” She bites her lip. “Pun not intended.”

James can’t help it; he laughs, a tiny thing. It’s nice, though. Real.

Pads,

Can’t say much, but we’re working harder to find you. I doubt that you ever receive any of these, but I don’t want you to feel alone, so even if it’s a tiny, tiny chance you do, I want to keep writing anyway.

Hang in there. As always, I love you.

Yours,

Prongs.

It’s midnight a few days later when Bullet returns. James is awake, staring at the ceiling and thinking through the last time he saw Sirius, trying to remember what the last thing he told him was. He does this a lot. It’s a fucked-up coping mechanism, but he thinks if he tried to stop he would fall apart.

There’s a sharp tapping on the window. A few seconds of silence pass and then Remus and James shoot out of bed in unison, staring at each other through the gloom.

Awake too? James mouths. Remus nods. Then, they both rush for the window.

There's a small, white envelope tied to Bullet's leg, pristine and sweet-smelling like the expensive parchment of before. Remus scrambles to untie it, hands shaking hard, while James casts *lumos* and drags Remus onto his bed, drawing the curtains.

"Open it," he hisses. "Come on-"

Remus tears the envelope open. Under the stark white light, the parchment is blinding, and for a moment James can't make out any of the writing. Then, his eyes adjust and he shuffles around to squash himself in next to Remus. Together, they knock heads and read.

Dearest Lucius,

It was truly wonderful to hear from you, especially so close to the Christmas period. Send Narcissa our love; we heard from Bellatrix recently that you both begun attempting to conceive again, and if so, Orion and I are delighted to hear it. Narcissa is still young, but at seventeen, she is observably quite ready for this responsibility. I trust you are aware of her necessity to bear child, as such is our sacred duty as the hereditary representatives of the Noble and Ancient Houses, despite how they have fallen from grace as of late.

Orion and I have been further pleased to hear of your success at the Ministry. Direly needed overhauls are surely safe in your capable hands. Please do wish the Minister our best. From what I understand, he admires our family greatly.

Regulus has successfully integrated into Durmstrang. He finds the culture to be agreeable, and his grades, of course, are exceptional. Orion and I deeply regret not sending him sooner, but we are optimistic about the veracity of the school's claims of disciplinary success. If anybody can beat some stomach into our only remaining son, it shall surely be the Nordic.

It is, of course, at the Dark Lord's discretion how much we share of the situation with our recently disinherited. From what we know, He is still keeping the little stain under His thumb. This is perhaps inappropriate to share beyond immediate family, but if you must know, the last time I saw the boy, it appeared that the Dark Lord has been successful in subduing his arduous spirit -- by our own relative experience, of course, as thorough training of the morally incapacitated could surely only be achieved by such a remarkable figurehead of Pureblood liberation, such a magnificent symbol of the strength of Pure Magic.

I have shared far too much, forgive me. I suppose I simply wish to impress on you the importance of a strong-minded, ethically sound heir, which is, by my understanding, best achieved when the mother is youngest and most fertile. Or perhaps I am merely superstitious. It is in my nature, after all, to remain traditional in all that I do.

By all means, keep up your fantastic work at the Ministry. You have our full support in your valiant effort to purge the magical world of treachery. And hear me when I say this: we shall win.

Yours faithfully,

Walburga Irma Black

By the end of the letter, James is trembling with anger. Not really in control of his body anymore, he shoves himself back against the headboard, curling his arms around his stomach, and tries to remember how to breathe right.

Beside him, Remus is in a similar state, rigid and shaking as he scans the letter over and over and over again. They sit in silence like that for a while, neither able to speak, quiet nighttime spearing the air.

"He's got him," James breathes, when he's able to speak again. "You-know-who. He's got Sirius."

James is still in his pyjamas as he sprints through the halls, past multiple startled portraits and one surprised teacher on patrol. He bounds up multiple flights of stairs and over a high outcropping that overlooks the east wing, flying through the darkness like the devil is on his heels. The devil, in this instance, is only Remus, who barely keeps up, panting and pale, but urges James on every time he starts to slow.

By the time they make it to the gargoyle outside of the headmaster's office, they're both out of breath. "Please," James gasps. "Bit of an emergency."

"I don't open for emergencies," the gargoyle tells him cheekily.

Remus shoves him aside. "Peppermint toads," he says to the gargoyle sternly.

The gargoyle glares, then lets them pass.

"Lucky guess," Remus stays, by way of explanation. "Come on." He tugs James up the stairs.

Dumbledore is still awake, evidently, despite the late hour. Behind his desk, he looks surprisingly pale by the candlelight, and when Remus and James burst in, he stares at them for a moment before sighing very heavily.

"Come in," he says simply. "I suppose we must have this conversation eventually. Like most things that we are unprepared for, it has arrived far too soon."

James and Remus exchange long looks. Together, they sit down on the other side of Dumbledore's desk. The headmaster's chairs are surprisingly soft, cushioned in bright green velvet.

Dumbledore clears his throat, putting down his quill. "I suppose you're here to discuss young Sirius Black's absence?"

"Like last time, sir," James says. "But we know more now. And you have to listen this time."

He expects Dumbledore to laugh at him for that, but the man just nods good-naturedly. "As I will, Mr. Potter. However, I think I must be transparent with you in saying that -- and you may be disappointed with me to hear this -- I am already aware of Mr. Black's current situation."

James feels himself stiffen. "You are?"

Dumbledore sighs heavily. "Yes, Mr. Potter. I'm afraid I've been aware since Mr. Black was first taken into Lord Voldemort's captivity in June."

Shock-horror, cold and thick like a cracked egg, trickles down James' back. He stares off at nothing, stunned. He can't find anything to say. Apparently neither can Remus, because they both sit in a silence that feels almost obedient as Dumbledore pushes on.

"You see, Mr. Potter, Mr. Lupin, it was to me that young Sirius turned when he felt he had attained knowledge of one of Lord Voldemort's great weaknesses. In fact, I might say, his single greatest." Dumbledore, apparently having determined that his ink has dried, files his parchment away in his desk, slow and methodical. The candle flickers and the walls ripple with light. "You see, Sirius Black is nothing if not perceptive. I mightn't presume, but it appears his upbringing has made this a necessity. When he discovered something he felt might aid the war effort, he attempted to bring it to my attention."

"And?" James demands.

Dumbledore fixes him with a piercing blue stare. "He returned to the school three days after the end of the term. He found me and told me everything he knew. Immediately, I knew that he had stumbled on something... something quite spectacular. And quite foolishly, I might say, I allowed him to return home."

It hits like a slap in the face. "You knew he was captured. You knew. And you didn't do anything. You didn't tell us." James slams a fist down on top of the desk. "You didn't tell us! You left him there to die-"

Dumbledore holds up a hand. "A group of very powerful wizards in my employ, Mr. Potter, work under me in their attempt to stall the Dark Lord's ascension. They, too, were quite concerned to learn of Sirius' captivity. We have

attempted to return him..." Dumbledore seems to count.
"Half a dozen times, now, I believe."

"And?!" James demands again.

"And each time, I am deeply ashamed to inform you, we have failed."

Remus is shaking his head slowly. "It doesn't make sense," he murmurs. "If he knows something you-know-who doesn't want getting out...?"

"Why has he not killed Mr. Black?" Ignoring James' flinch, Dumbledore considers Remus for a moment. "An admirably level-headed question."

"Yeah, I've sort of had to be level-headed, sir. My best friend is missing."

"Point taken." Dumbledore stands, crossing the room to the window. Silhouetted against the night sky, outlined in the stars, he might as well be an omen of death. "We believe he has yet to kill Mr. Black for risk of... contamination. When a wizard is killed, particularly in a violent manner, there is always the risk of their return as a ghost, and in that instance, Mr. Black would have access to his pre-death memories. If, by a variety of causes, the Dark Lord's wand was to be forced to present its *priori incantatem*, even dead, Sirius would live to tell the tale, despite how briefly." Dumbledore's eyes glaze over for a moment. "There are other methods of conversing with the dead, and the Dark Lord, I suspect, finds himself quite fascinated by them."

"Then why not obliviate him?" Remus asks.

"Memory alterations are, regrettably, imperfect. A strong legillemens could plausibly break them. And there is only

one legillemens, by my knowledge, more powerful than the Dark Lord."

Remus inhales sharply. "You, sir."

Dumbledore nods. "Indeed."

"There are other ways." Remus stands up and starts to pace. James is about an inch from hyperventilating by this point -- *dark bruise on the back of his neck; the smile Sirius shot him as he got off the train last year; that blueish-white, blotchy curse scar Sirius always said looked like a cloud on his knee; whispers in the Ministry about torture and prisoners of war and brutality; the taste of bile rising and rising in the back of his throat* -- and he wants to grab Remus and shake him, hard, and ask him how in Merlin's name he's even functional right now.

"Indeed," Dumbledore repeats again, in that infuriatingly calm way of his.

"Torture." Remus pauses, then keeps pacing. "They could torture him until he... until he cracked, sir. Then, even if you could get to blocked memories, they would be unreadable. Or he could-" Remus' voice shakes. "He could torture Sirius until Sirius cracked, sir, and then kill him, so his ghost couldn't share."

"Perhaps." Dumbledore seems to consider that, nodding. "And perhaps if it had been you, Mr. Lupin, who had discovered his secret, he might have resorted to such brutality."

"But Sirius is a human pureblood from a Noble and Ancient family," Remus puts in fluidly.

"If my approximation is correct, it appears that Lord Voldemort is predisposed to find the needless brutalisation of Pure minds... tasteless, yes," Dumbledore agrees. "I don't doubt he might be willing to torture the body of a Pureblood, but the mind... in Blood politics, it is quite a distinction to make."

James leans over and vomits on the floor. Remus rushes over to rub his back. He wants to throw punches, wants to break something. All he can do is curl up in Dumbledore's soft, green chair and retch.

"You're okay," Remus whispers into his hair, hugging him very tight around the shoulders as he waves his wand to clean up the throw-up. "You're alright. I promise."

"How can you be so *calm*?!" James explodes, and Remus flinches even though it's directed at the headmaster. "My best friend is a captive of you-know-who and all you can do is sit here and theorise about how best he could kill him?!"

Dumbledore hesitates. "I've disappointed you, Mr. Potter. I understand that quite well. I would only offer in explanation that..." He trails off, then continues. "That if Sirius Black's information was less important than it is, he would already be dead. There is still hope. That's why we're discussing this."

"Then why aren't we trying harder?" James spits. "Why aren't we sending more people, telling the ministry, telling *anyone*?!"

"Because it's... James, it's leverage," Remus says into his ear softly. "That Dumbledore has this over you-know-who."

"This isn't *politics*, this is life or death!"

Dumbledore inclines his head slightly. "Which is, one might argue, what makes it especially political, Mr. Potter."

James stares at him. "You've been trying to get him back, then?"

"Yes. Persistently."

"Well, you haven't been trying hard enough," he snaps. "You-know-who is probably bloody torturing him, or--" He hears his own voice tremour. "Or hurting him. Or something else awful."

Dumbledore nods wearily. He looks older than his years in that moment. "And it pains me every day to think of Sirius in that situation, it does. I fear it is both a blessing and a curse that, had he had a different upbringing, he might not have made it this long. It's strange, isn't it? The unequal dissemination of suffering."

James' heart throbs in his chest. "I just want to see him again, sir."

"I know." Dumbledore's face softens like mould. "And I can only apologise, Mr. Potter, for how you and your friends have undoubtedly suffered."

"An apology isn't good enough."

"I know," Dumbledore says simply. "I know."

Pads,

Not sending these anymore. I know you won't get them. I'm gonna keep writing, though, and save them for when I see you again.

We found out what happened to you. Remus is a genius, truly, and we went and confronted Dumbledore about it and he confirmed our fears. I don't think I've ever felt the way I did that night before. Like I wanted to.. Break something. I don't know. Hurt someone. Throw something. Punch a wall. I don't have a temper -- I'm not like you -- but I might as well have had one. I don't like who I was at that moment. But I still feel like shit now, anyway, but instead of angry I'm just sad again, which is sort of worse, so that's that, I suppose.

In my head it's red like a nightmare. You're chained up in some basement cellar somewhere and nobody's there to rescue you, and you're all bloody like a prisoner of war. I have nightmares about it. Remus has told me it's stupid to think like that, because you-know-who has no reason to put you through the wringer, but I can't get the image out of my head. Dark bruise on the back of your neck. I can't stop. I can't stop. I'm trying but I just can't.

Remus is worried I'm getting sick. He keeps saying I should talk to a mind-healer, keeps trying to diagnose me with muggle illnesses that are all these letters he doesn't ever spell out (something beginning with a 'p', I can't remember, full of consonants and scary in that medical way some words can be) and I just sort of let him do it, because I think fussing over me is the one thing keeping him from going completely fucking manic, if I'm honest with you.

Peter doesn't talk to us much right now. He gets nightmares, too -- he's shit at silencing charms and they always fall the moment he goes to sleep so I hear it all. I'd like to say it's because he's worried about you, mate, but I don't know. He worries about everything. He doesn't come to Padfoot's Army meetings. I wonder sometimes where he goes at those times.

There's so many things I want to say and I don't think any of them are worthy? If that makes sense? I don't know. Every moment of every day it's like, oh, he would want to hear about that. He'd like to know about this. He'd laugh if I told him about that other thing. And then I sit down to write you a letter and it all clots like a nosebleed.

I love you. I'm gonna try to write more often. If we find you next week, it'll be bloody awkward to give you just one letter to read, won't it? Sort of defeats the object.

Yours,

Prongs.

Eventually, school lets out for the winter holidays. Most students go home. More go home every year since the war started. Some students never come back, parents too anxious to let them out of their sight.

James remains, Remus too. They spend most of their time huddled on the sofa in front of the fire in the Gryffindor common room, scouring the papers for any hint at you-know-who's location. It's an exercise in misery, because even if they were to track him down tomorrow, they still wouldn't be able to do anything about it, but they still try, probably to grasp at some semblance of control.

The castle goes quiet and cold over the winter period. They're two of the only Gryffindors who stay behind. Sirius used to stay most years, and he loved Christmas, loved the excuse to lavish increasingly ridiculous gifts on his friends like a git. Without him, and without Peter, and without most of the rest of the castle, it feels hollow and grey like an old picture. A parody of what it's meant to be this time of year.

James isn't religious in the slightest, but he thinks that surely Christmas is supposed to feel holy, not cursed.

"You need to stop torturing yourself like this," Remus tells him on Christmas Eve. It's probably Christmas Day by the time he finds him, actually -- James, after another nightmare, shuffles down into the common room to bundle himself into a blanket and stare into the dying embers of the fire, and Remus, as he always does, follows him there.

James shrugs from within his tight little cocoon. "I can't help it. The nightmares."

"I know." Remus stares at him, hovering like he doesn't know whether he's allowed to sit down. "I know you can't."

James shuffles over. Remus comes to sit beside him and they share the blanket.

For a while they just watch the fire. Snow is piling up against the glass of the window and Christmas morning has brought thick, cloudy skies that look like they'll drain away the ice with rain by the time dawn arrives. Midwinter feels cruel in that way. Even when there are beautiful moments, they melt and die too quickly. The nights are too long for comfort. Everything feels too long for comfort, actually. The world is composed of waiting and waiting and nothing much else.

Remus lays his head tentatively on James' shoulder. He's not a particularly touchy person usually. Perhaps tonight is the exception. Rules are made to be broken, but James wonders if they'll be able to put this one back together.

"I wonder if he knows it's Christmas," Remus murmurs. His eyes are blind by the light of the fire, glazed white.

"I'm sure he does," James says, though he's not sure, he's not sure of anything. "Bet he's thinking of all the stupid things he's gonna get us next year. When we're all back together again."

"Yeah."

"Though it'll be harder for him to go crazy with it, not if he doesn't have access to his family's money."

Remus laughs croakily. "He'll land softly. I'm sure your family would buy him a house if he asked nicely enough."

"They're worried, too," James agrees.

"I haven't told my folks yet."

"No?"

Remus shakes his head. "They worry enough about me. I don't wanna... make them fret. Y'know. They don't deserve that."

James leans over and kisses him. Remus seems to expect it, which isn't much of a surprise. He's smart like that, smart enough to know when something is breaking.

It's short and soft, less like a kiss than it's like a house fire. When they break apart, it's a little wet.

"Sorry," James murmurs. "Didn't mean to do that."

"It's okay." Remus shuffles down to rest his head on James' shoulder again. "I don't mind."

"You liked it?"

"Yeah."

James smiles faintly. “It’s not the same. Not without him.”

Remus hesitates. “Then we’d better get on finding him.”

That’s about as close to a confession as either of them is going to get. James nods. Christmas Morning dawns like a plague, and they fall asleep there, and they sleep all the way through breakfast and lunch, and it’s nice, James thinks, to be able to rest for once.

Chapter End Notes

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BURIAL

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Pads,

Everybody came back from the winter holidays yesterday. Peter's not here. He sent a letter. Apparently, his mother's going to keep him home for the rest of the year. She's worried about him, with him being halfblood and -- how did you used to put it? Two-thirds squib? -- and all that. I can tell he absolutely hates it, and he said as much, but I think he's probably a bit relieved, too. Every day, it feels more like we're on the cusp of something big and ugly. Especially because everybody knows that Dumbledore is His biggest enemy, and if the fighting's going to start anywhere, it's gonna start here.

I shouldn't capitalise that. The 'he', I mean. Makes him feel too stupid powerful. Your mother did it, in the letter we swindled out of her. That was nuts, looking back on it, totally and utterly nuts. I guess we should be thankful we've desensitised Remus to taking risks, because if you told first-year-Moony that he would spend weeks of his fifth year forging a letter to deceive a pureblood matriarch into giving up information on the dealings of a Dark Lord, I think he would laugh you out of the room. Or piss himself.

It's quiet in the dorm. Remus and I spend a lot of time with each other, but we can only stick together for so much of the day before we can't stand the sight of one another, so we ration our time, sort of. He spends a lot of time with Lily (and I'm not even jealous! You should be vastly, eminently

proud of me) and I spend a lot of time in the library, of all places. Between trying to track you-know-who and researching stuff to teach at Padfoot's Army, and OWLs and everything, I'm flat-out with work most of the time, which sucks, but what else am I gonna spend my time on?

Especially since I've sworn off fighting with Sniv. Yeah, I know. But I promised Lily I'd try to be better, and a part of me actually wants to. I think if you showed up tomorrow and asked me to mess with him, I'd say yes, though. But that's looking less and less likely, and the more I imagine you coming back, the less I think things can ever go back to normal. Not after more than six months. Not with that big, important thing Dumbledore says you know.

I've been trying to figure out what it is. That thing. Maybe if more people know, and his secret spreads, he'll let you go. Wishful thinking, isn't it? But I can't help imagining it.

Moons suck now, by the way. Without you. You were always best at dealing with the wolf when it shows up, and managing it on my own leaves me about as achy and bashed-up as Remus some months. He feels very bad about it. I do my best not to make a big deal of it.

I'm rambling. I love you. Remember we're thinking of you. And one of these days I'm gonna come get you out myself if I have to.

Yours,

Prongs.

February arrives bitter and still. The month is mostly consumed by a particularly nasty Transfiguration thesis, which James had originally intended to collaborate with

Peter on and now has to do alone. As schoolwork begins to pile on, their Padfoot's Army meetings get sparser and sparser.

"We'll be back to a normal schedule by spring," Lily promises a handful of fourth-years, after they miss a whole week for the first time. "I promise. It's just, it's OWL year, and..." She trails off.

James shuffles over to back her up. They're clustered into a hallway near Flitwick's office. "I'm working on some new duelling techniques to teach," he promises. "It's gonna be great."

The fourth-years exchange glances, but they seem to accept that, dispersing off towards the north end of the castle. Lily and James exchange faint, awkward smiles.

"How's your thesis coming along?" James asks, just to be able to say something.

Lily clears her throat. "Yeah, pretty well, I think." She brushes a strand of hair out of her face. "It's... it's a lot, with everything going on. Sometimes I wonder if the professors are aware that times like this are hard. For lots of us. Not in the least, people who are suffering directly because of the war."

James has been thinking the same thing. Maybe it's an exercise in empathy to take his fear and anger about Sirius' disappearance and extend it to the castle's muggleborn populace. He's been doing his best to do it. "I wish they were more considerate, sometimes," he agrees. Then, because gallows humour is the tone of the hour, "I can't juggle Padfoot's Army, schoolwork *and* letter-writing to Sirius, I'll bloody explode."

Lily laughs and then seems to realise what he's said, cutting herself off. "You still write letters to him?"

"All the time," James nods. "I don't send them anymore. I know they won't reach him."

Lily chews her lip. "I figured they wouldn't," she agrees.

"But it's nice to keep writing. I'm gonna keep them in a box and give it to him when we find him. If we find him."

"Yeah."

"Makes it feel like he's still there."

"I worry, sometimes," Lily says, stilted, "That I'm going to lose somebody to this war."

That's not what James expected out of her. He sits down against the wall and she sits beside him, both their legs stretched out on the stone in front of them.

"You are?" James asks, after a brief stretch of quiet.

"Yeah." Lily furls and unfurls her fingers around the strap of her bookbag. "I think that's why it's hard to make friends. Apart from my background, of course. Because pureblood girls won't be seen with you, not when you're a bookish muggleborn who isn't tomboyish enough to laugh at or feminine enough to gossip about. And boys won't be friends with you, because you're a girl who won't date them but doesn't care about their sports, either, and you're too emotional when you care about your rights and not emotional enough when they try to get in your pants and you shoot them down."

James' stomach twists with guilt. "I see."

She sighs. "And you make connections, sometimes. With other muggleborns and the like. Mary Macdonald and stuff, people who have lived the same life as you. But it's... it's hard to get past the fear, I guess. That even if the death eaters don't kill you, they might kill the people like you, and then you will have lost somebody, and isn't it better to have never had them in the first place?"

James doesn't know what to say to that. *I don't regret that I met him, not at all, or, I didn't think about any of that for a moment, I'm sorry, or, god I was a shithead, and I worry I still am, how do I stop?*

Instead of any of that, nothing comes out.

Eventually, Lily shuffles her knees up to her chest, looking forlornly across the corridor, and continues on, "I don't think people want to talk about how shit it is sometimes, James."

"I'm sorry."

"You should be." She shrugs. "When Black disappeared, I didn't want to believe it. In my head, it would never be somebody like him. But I think I've been thinking about it differently lately."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." She stands up, looking down at James with hard, sad eyes. "He didn't get hurt *because* of what he was, but in spite of it. So in a way, it sort of makes it all worse. Because if they'd do that to him, what would they do to me?"

She leaves James sitting there, watching after her as she disappears off down the hallway to her next class. He feels sort of like a piece of dirt, or one of those great ugly spiders

that people don't bother trying to put outside when they see them, because getting close probably isn't a good idea. His stomach churns with nausea. There's the impulse to get angry there, a little. But it's mostly sadness.

(At the next Padfoot's Army meeting, Remus takes the session. "Today," he says, with a hollow sort of look on his face like he's facing down the pyre, "We're going to learn about Dark creatures and how best to defend against them. I think I know someplace in the castle where I can find a boggart, so that'll be the next session I take, sometime in March, but this week, we're gonna be looking over the theory on... on half-breeds and the like. So, if everybody could gather around the table in the centre..."

James wants to stop him, but he's a coward, so he says nothing that night as Remus teaches, as he talks about his species like he's a monstrosity, nods and abides as people speculate on how vicious the nature of the Wolf can be. Says nothing as they both fold themselves into bed at midnight. Says nothing at all.)

As it has a habit of doing, life crawls on. The disappearances ramp up as spring blooms through the grounds. James and Remus and Lily forge a ritual -- every week, for a few hours, they lie on the rocks by the lake, bluebells pushing up through the stone around them, and they spread copies of all editions of all the wizarding papers they can find from the week out in front of them. Seven copies of the Prophet. Two editions of some new upstart, the Quibbler. A few more obscure spreads. It eats away at his time. James' parents write to him and he doesn't write back.

Then, like it'll do anything, they hunt for him through the pages. Scour for the locations of his killings. Note down the towns each of his victims died in. Their names. Their ages.

"He's moving south," Remus determines, on the first Sunday of March. The afternoon sun has flushed his face slightly. "We can be sure of that."

James shakes his head. "I'd still say we have to keep our eyes on Greater Birmingham. Those big, old money estates a few miles out of the city. It's been, what, six muggles killed in that city now? And we know the Rosiers live out there, on private land. Maybe he's camped out there, in their house. That's his base."

"It would be stupid for him to have a base," Remus argues. "Not when he needs to constantly stay on the move to expand to Europe. We know for sure he's been recruiting in Norway and Sweden, right? There's no way he's sleeping in some estate house in Northern England."

Lily's shaking her head. "No," she says. "No, I think... I think you're both looking at this wrong."

"Oh?" James asks.

She nods. "I think asking where he is might not help. We should ask *why* he's moving as he is."

James shrugs. "He's a bloody lunatic, isn't it? He'd kill muggles anywhere. On the moon, if they happened to be there."

Lily flinches sharply.

"Sorry."

She shakes off the apology. "It's fine." She takes a shaky breath and pushes on. "I agree. But it's not just muggles he's killing, is it? He might be a bigot, and a violent, genocidal, fascist bigot at that, but he's a politician, if you look at it that way. He needs to garner public approval. And more than that, he needs to eliminate viable alternatives."

James hesitates, then shakes his head. "That's assuming he won't try to rule by force. Y'know. Violent takeover."

Lily laughs in a tight, hollow voice. "That's not how dictatorships start. You don't win over the electorate by abolishing it. You win it over by cutting out the bits of it that oppose you, and leaving the rest without an alternative. And eventually, your populace is split into people who like you and people who can't tell you that they don't."

"In English?"

She hesitates. "At the end of all this, he's still going to need a wizarding Britain to rule over. If he tried to kill every person who disagreed with him, or every person he didn't like, there would be nothing left by the winning of the war but the Noble and Ancients. He's not killing people who might fight back. He's taking away people's *ability* to fight back, if they're like me, through intimidation and violence; and if they know they're safe -- if they're Purebloods, if they're of magical heritage, if they're white and British-born and willing to stay in their lane -- he's taking away their will."

Pads,

I hate this. I hate this. I hate this.

Can't get up the energy to write more today. That's sort of the worst part.

I love you,

Prongs.

In their second year, they found a boggart in a cupboard in the dungeons, deep down the winding passageways to the underside of the lake. It was the four of them then, and James remembers it well, remembers how Sirius flung open the rattling wardrobe and his mother stepped out.

James shoved him out of the way almost immediately, and Sirius' mother blinked at him for a moment, the boggart confused as to the colour of his soul, before morphing and twisting into a tall, pale lady -- a stranger with hollow eyes and a translucent face like something from a horror movie.

"A ghost, James?!" Sirius demanded, in a strangled voice.

"More like a demon!" James yelled back, pushing Sirius firmly behind himself. "Riddikulus!"

The woman's long, tattered dress got tangled around her legs and she staggered back into the cupboard. James slammed the door closed behind her. All four boys stood there for a moment, staring at each other, breathing heavily, eyes darting.

"That was definitely a ghost," Remus commented into the silence. "Like the one from *The Ring*."

It's one of James' fondest memories to look back on, and not just because he felt sort of like a hero that day, but because Sirius had seemed to really start to trust him after that. It

had made the connection between them go beyond Quidditch and pranks, meandering into something more whole.

Now, facing down a rattling cupboard, Remus looks far less certain of himself than Sirius did that day. But he's got the whole of Padfoot's Army behind him, and he seems to know he can't avoid seeing the colour of his own soul for much longer, because he sighs heavily and, with a flick of his wand, unlocks the door.

The rattling halts. For a moment, James thinks nothing is going to come out. Then, something thumps against the door and it swings open a little.

The heavy thing flops onto the floor. Gasps scatter through the room like pops of electricity. Whatever it is, it's bloody.

And then he already knows, deep down, what Remus' boggart has become.

Remus takes a hesitant step forward. "Riddikulus," he says, but it's half-hearted. The boggart doesn't move.

The door swings open a little more and the body flops the rest of the way out onto the floor. There it lies still.

Transfixed, Remus lowers his wand and crosses the room. He nudges the thing over with his foot and then goes staggering backwards, heaving, as Sirius' grey, dead face swings around to the ceiling, as his dark head lolls against the stone floor. *Rigor mortis* has already taken the corpse (it's a boggart, James tries to tell himself furiously, just a boggart, just a fucking boggart) and it's stiff and cold.

Without thinking, just like they're second-years again, James grabs Remus and shoves him behind him. The

boggart twitches but doesn't change form.

"Riddikulus," James tells it firmly. "Riddikulus."

On the second try, Sirius' body morphs and twists and then, standing before them all is Slughorn in a clown outfit, face painted and all.

Uncomfortable laughter spreads through the room. Everybody's staring. Behind James, Remus is stiff as a board and twice as brittle.

"Okay!" James raises his voice to shout. "Form a line and go one-by-one."

Lily has already taken the reins. "Come on, it won't hurt you," she's already calling to the next person. James feels her eyes burn into his back.

He shuffles Remus out of the door and they slide down the wall together outside. It's dark out now, curfew soon to arrive, and in the dim light, Remus' face is wet. He's not shaking, though. It's not fear, this feeling, James agrees. Just grief.

"It looked so real," Remus says, voice raw. "He looked-"

"It," James corrects. He drops an arm around Remus' shoulders. "You're okay. It wasn't him."

"I thought it would be the moon."

James had thought it might be, too. "Did you see mine?"

"No."

"It was him, too. The same way."

Remus stills. Then, he laughs, a strangled sort of sound. "I thought it would still be that stupid horror movie ghost."

James laughs, too. He wipes his wet face. "Look at us. He would love this, to see us getting all... all upset."

"Yeah."

"Would give him his kicks."

Remus nods, trying to chuckle. It comes out sort of like a simulacrum. "Kiss me?" he asks, less a request and more a plea.

James obliges. A chunk of both of them is missing, though, and it just tastes like ash.

Pads,

Wish we could do a sonar tracking thing. Soner? Sonor? I heard it on a muggle radio show last summer and it sounded so cool. Like ping ping ping and then when it bounces back you can see what's in front of you. It'd be so cool if we could search for you that way. Map out all of Britain in front of us and then figure out where the terrain changes and shows you're there.

It's almost April now, and Remus, Lily and I are spending more and more time trying to track you-know-who. The papers are shit at reporting on it, but we hunted down an obscure pureblood publication the other day (It's called 'Le Nouveau Monde', have you heard of it?) and pooled our money to buy a subscription. It's gross stuff, awful stuff, and we always burn it once we're done with it, but it's a lot more open about his movements than other places, presumably because it's funded by death eaters and

couldn't possibly spread inaccurate information about how many muggleborns he's killed this week, lest the Noble and Ancients file a complaint with the ethics board.

We think we've narrowed down a few of his frequently visited locations. I don't think he's got one singular base he stays at, so he's probably left you with one of his cronies, right? Hey, at least the food should be top-notch. With how some of the house elves of these old families cook, you'd swear they sold their labour to pay off culinary school debt, not for honor or servitude or whatever else they spout. So hopefully you're being kept in a lifestyle to which you can become accustomed.

It's hard to figure out how to talk about you. Lily talks about you like you're dead, like we're trying to find you so we can avenge you. Remus talks about you like you'll be home by next week. I hover somewhere in the middle, because I hope to god we'll find you, but even if we do, I don't think either of us is gonna be the same.

Keep your chin up, Sirius. We're coming.

Yours,

Prongs.

As OWL work ramps up, James finds himself sleeping less and less. Remus warns him he's going to run himself off his feet but he doesn't care. He can hold on until the summer. He can hold on until the summer. So long as he keeps clinging on, he can make it through this awful year.

By mid-April, between research about you-know-who, nightmares about Sirius, OWL revision, Padfoot's Army training and everything else has gotten him down to

sleeping two or three hours a night, if that. James' parents write to him and he doesn't write back. Lily seems to think he's being very, very stupid, even though she does the exact same thing.

She shrugs him off when he points that out. "If I don't excel at these, I won't be able to make a living. Your family could buy a troll a ministry position if they wanted to."

Not with the way things are going, James wants to say, but he remembers, empathy, empathy, empathy, and so he bites his tongue.

Remus is better at managing his time. James catches him writing a letter of his own late one night, after he comes back from the library.

"I do them too," he says, when Remus tries to tuck it away hurriedly. "Letters to him, I mean."

"Oh." Remus shrugs. "Good. Gives him lots to catch up on when we give them to him."

The OWL exams are in late May. As they draw closer, April slipping by in a hot daze, James realises he sees little of Dumbledore at the staff table, little of him anywhere.

"Maybe we should pay attention to that," he tells Lily, as he catches her in the hallway on her way to arithmancy.

"Y'know, he told us he's got this group of powerful wizards working for him, undermining you-know-who, some sort of activist group, revolutionaries-- maybe that'll help us track his movements--"

Lily gives him a strained smile. "Can we talk about this another time? I'm late."

James holds himself back. "Right. Sorry."

She sweeps past him and away down the hall. He stewes in worry for the rest of the day.

It's strange, though, what the solidarity of it all does to Gryffindor. At first, when Sirius didn't reappear for the year, James knew a few people thought the worst -- the other type of worst, the bad type. The type where Sirius left school to follow his family's wishes, to be educated in some Dark place by some Dark wizard. The type where this was willful.

But now, especially with Padfoot's Army, people seem to have made a martyr of him. James sees mourning in people's faces when his name is mentioned, but more than that, anger. Fear. Indignance at the falling of a comrade.

"His family was awful to him, weren't they?" a seventh-year demands of James one evening, in a cluster of other sixth and seventh-years.

"Uh," James says, because he doesn't really feel like digging up his friend's dead and buried secrets and holding them up before a jury. "I don't really know. I guess."

"We thought as much." The seventh-year, Benjy something-or-other, clenches his jaw. "Bastards. It won't happen to anybody else, I can tell you that."

"Yeah?" James asks, hopefully.

Benjy nods. He pulls James down into the little cluster. "You're not the only one doing some, uh, direct action. Me and a few of the prefects, we thought we'd set up a system

to keep an eye on the younger kids. Especially newer first years. Y'know, make sure their families aren't... Dark or something. Or hurting them." He glances around furtively. "We want to start with Gryffindors and then try to coordinate something with the other prefects."

James nods, feeling a little faint. "That sounds amazing," he says.

"We're hoping it'll help," offers a sixth-year prefect. She offers James a tight smile. "We're tired of watching students grow up into death eaters. Black was the last straw."

Feeling very tired, James looks down at the table. "Do you think you'll be able to do any good in Slytherin?"

Benjy winces. "Maybe. We don't get on with any of their prefects, but... we're going to try."

"Right." James hesitates, then looks up. "Why is it always them? That grow up into fascists, I mean."

The group glance around at one another.

"He's right," Lily says, materialising next to James and sitting down in the empty seat at his side. He only jumps a little. "I've been wondering about that, too. I mean, bigotry isn't a personality type. It's not something that just... happens because you've got a certain set of traits." Her face closes off. "It's upbringing, it's class, it's parentage, it's... lots of stuff."

One of the seventh-year prefects, a girl James knows with the surname 'Morris', speaks up. "I'd agree with you on that, but the hat... the hat doesn't just sort on personality, right? It sorts you based on what you want. Didn't it let you have a say?"

James expects Lily to say something like, *yes, it wanted to put me in Ravenclaw but I chose Gryffindor*. She shakes her head instead. "No, it... it chose very quick for me. I didn't even really get to say anything."

"Right. Well, for most of us, it takes our preference into account. And it's not really about personality, then, is it? It's about the kids of blood traitors choosing Gryffindor, and the kids of Noble and Ancients, of purebloods, choosing Slytherin, and that's why there are so many more muggleborns in Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw, because there's way more smart and kind people in the world than exceptionally brave and eminently mean people, right? It's not an even distribution of traits, so a lot of the time, the traits for Gryffindor and Slytherin aren't really about personality-

"They're about social pressure," Lily finishes, like something quite horrible is dawning on her. "Oh, that's awful."

Morris shrugs. "For some people. For others, it's reassuring. Means I don't think I'll have to put up with a hate crime in the common room. Being here as a muggleborn feels safe, doesn't it?"

Lily bites her lip like she wants to say she's never felt safe at all. Instead, she says, "Yeah."

It makes enough sense that James feels like an idiot for not having noticed it before. "All the more reason to try to reach out to Slytherin kids," he says eventually. "I mean, even if they're rotten, bigotted little assholes. They don't deserve to grow up into... that."

Benjy nods, looking thoughtful. "Yeah." He looks across at James. "You've grown up quite a bit, haven't you?"

James is barely sixteen and most of the time he still feels like a kid. Still, he nods. "I guess. I'm trying to be a good person."

It sounds stupid and plaintive, but Lily shoots him an appreciative look over her shoulder. The little cluster seems to appreciate that, too. "Good man," Benjy says amicably. "Good to hear."

"Just sucks that this happening was what triggered it," James finishes lamely. "I think I'd be the same if he hadn't vanished."

"You gotta give yourself more credit," Benjy opposes. "We all have to grow up eventually. It would've happened regardless. Just sucks it's been forced on you so quick, huh?"

James nods. He still feels sick in that thick, chronic way that makes every moment feel like wading through thick syrup, but his head is a little clearer after the talk.

"If I can to anything to help with the plan you guys have," he offers, "Just let me know."

"So long as you let us know if we can help with Padfoot's Army," Morris agrees, grinning. "A real solid idea, that was. For keeping people calm."

James smiles. "Yeah. Yeah, it's been good."

There's a faint cough behind him. Remus' hand lands on his shoulder. "Didn't we say we were going to the library?"

"Oh, yeah," James gasps. "I'll tell you about everything when we get there, come on--"

The two of them grab their stuff and rush off together. James feels lighter.

Pads,

OWLs suck!!!!!! You're actually super lucky not to be here, because god, it's awful. See, now I'm guilty for saying that because what if you're properly suffering, like, it's really really awful, and you read this and think I'm a right prick? On second thought, I don't care if you think I'm a right prick.

I sort of do, actually. It's complicated, how I feel about stuff like that right now. Because I made a promise to Lily and I think about it every day. How I swore to be better. It sort of haunts me, because a part of me is scared I'll fail at it and another part is scared I won't. I guess I'm scared I only want to be seen as a good person. But I'm also scared that people see me as a bad person. And I'm scared people see me as a good one, too, because then what do I do? Living life as a good person seems hard. Like, a really good person who actually tries at it.

Outside of the philosophising, all I do is revise. Lily and Remus and I do study dates together. Feels like the three of us spend all our time together these days. I'm doing my best to be less... pushy with her. And it's sort of working. When you actually talk to her, she's so much cooler. We've got a lot in common. Well. Not a lot. But we're finding a middle ground.

Remus is a bit of a mess. I am, too. I didn't tell you when it happened, but we found a boggart for PA and me and him have the same fear now. The boggart was the same, I mean. Really freaked him out when he saw it. Lily had to take

over for us. And I'm still not gonna tell you what it was, because it'll upset you, but you can probably guess along the right lines. So yeah. We're both fucked up about all that. About everything.

It's almost been a year. I keep wondering if you're gonna be the same when we see you again. When. I keep having to tell myself it's when. Not if. When.

Fuck. Fucking fuck. This fucking sucks, you know that? And you're an asshole. And I still love you. And I wish it didn't hurt this much. Somebody asked me the other day if your parents hurt you and I didn't know whether to lie or not.

Yours,

Prongs.

"It's not like it's going to get any more dire between now and the end of the exams," Remus tells him one night, as he revises his Muggle Studies work and James scours the evening Prophet for any news, despite the fact that it's almost always shلucky and dull in the second edition of the day. Any real action takes place overnight. Nothing will have changed by daylight.

"I know," James says for the fifth time. "But it helps me. Okay?"

Remus goes quiet. James thinks of his boggart again. Their boggart. He thinks Remus understands.

They're hiding out in an abandoned classroom, the library too full to concentrate in, with revising students crammed down every aisle. Remus cast a faint, glowy lumos when it started to get dark, and it hangs gently between them both,

filtering golden light out through the room. James has other things he should be doing -- revision, homework, writing back to his parents' last letter, which is still sitting on his bedside table.

"Why are you even revising Muggle Studies?" James asks. "You know all about that stuff. Isn't the exam just, like, asking what a car and a toaster and a plug is?"

"Yeah," Remus admits. "But... well. I'm checking it all over just in case."

"You will always mystify me."

Remus smiles faintly. "That's what I'm here for."

"And you succeed valiantly."

"Good to hear it." Remus looks up at him, still smiling that fond sort of smile. "You've got toothpaste on your front, by the way."

"Oh, bloody-" James tries to peel it off with his fingernail and it just goes spotty and pale in a stain against his robes. "Shit..."

"Here." Remus wets his thumb against his tongue and leans over, grabbing James' robes to rub at the stain gently. James lets him, their noses very close. Remus' breath smells like mint toothpaste, and his robes smell of topsoil from Herbology earlier.

Too quickly, the moment is over. Remus sits back in his seat and James stares out of the window just so he can stare at something that isn't Remus. "Thanks, Moons."

"Moons?"

“Sorry. Moony.”

Remus’ smile has fallen when James looks back at him. Silence takes them both again.

That is, until running footsteps sound out faintly, far away but drawing closer.

Remus looks up and meets James’ gaze. They half-stand, both of them, ready to gather their things should they be kicked out.

Lily bursts in, hair flying behind her. She’s clutching a stack of magazines and panting.

“Took me ages to find you both,” she rambles, staggering over to the head desk and plunking the pile down on it. “I had to ask Mary, and she sent me on a goosehunt to find that Hufflepuff James has been tutoring, and then-”

Lily draws in a deep breath and composes herself. Then, she turns to the both of them.

“I’ve got it,” she says, halfway tentative, halfway hopeful. “What might help us find Sirius. I think I’ve got it.”

James shoots out from behind his desk. “What?”

“I was sitting in the girls’ dorm,” Lily explains. “Reading. I decided I’d give myself a night off for once, you know? Just reread my favourite fantasy novel and try not to think about anything for the evening. And Marlene was talking with Cassandra about something stupid, really, in retrospect. Which of the witches’ magazines is the best. And they agreed they’re all awful, of course, because most of them are managed by men and pureblood men at that, who don’t

know *anything* about fashion, let alone what women are interested in beyond that--"

"Get to the point," Remus urges gently, seeming to sense that James is on the cusp of exploding or catching fire or something.

"I'm getting there," she snaps. "They were talking about *Witch Weekly* and how it's the best one because it's the most popular, so it gets the most high-profile interviews and scoops, and it manages to do photo shoots and press at the coolest places all over wizarding Britain, right? And Marlene said, oh, I love their wedding spreads, aren't they just darling? And Cassandra laughs and goes, I think they're quite repulsive, I could never live in one of those Ancient and Noble houses, not if they paid me, and Marlene said, *Witch Weekly* is about the only publication in the country that shows glances into the houses of the pureblood elite, through those wedding spread, and-- and--"

She looks between them both desperately.

"And what else do the really bad families do than get bloody married!" she explodes. "And we could look through all the wedding spreads to find the locations of each of their places--"

"And Sirius is likely to be in one of them," James says, as it all snaps into place. "We can locate each manor, because they've all got tons of properties but this'll show us where they live year-round--"

Lily is nodding in a desperate sort of way. "And we can get an eye for the interiors, the layouts, and from there we can keep a look out for the families' names in the papers and narrow down our selection--"

“Merlin, you’re a genius-”

Flushed with pleasure, Lily shakes her head. “It’s a start isn’t it? I borrowed all of Marlene’s copies, they date back to this time last year, and it’ll take a while to go through them all and find their locations, find their owners, but--”

But James has been swarmed by a growing grin. He can feel it twisting his face. It almost hurts in its unfamiliarity. He surges forwards without thinking about it and hugs Lily hard around the middle. She stiffens up and then pats his back awkwardly.

“You’re welcome,” she says doggedly into his shoulder. “Now, if we want to make a dent before morning classes, we should start now.”

James pulls away. “But-- your night off,” he stays, stupidly.

She examines his face, properly studies it. James wonders if he’s still got toothpaste on his robes.

“I will never understand you,” she says.

Remus laughs breathlessly from behind them. “Funny, we were...” he trails off. “Thank you.”

“No problem.” Lily turns back to the pile of *Witch Weekly*’s on the desk. “My night off can wait. Come on.”

Pads,

Dolohov, Malfoy, Rosier, Fawley, Carrow, Yaxley. Dolohov, Malfoy, Rosier, Fawley, Carrow, Yaxley. Dolohov, Malfoy, Rosier, Fawley, Carrow, Yaxley. Dolohov, Malfoy, Rosier, Fawley, Carrow, Yaxley. Dolohov, Malfoy, Rosier, Fawley,

Carrow, Yaxley. Dolohov, Malfoy, Rosier, Fawley, Carrow, Yaxley.

We've got it down to that lot. Obviously, we know it's not... necessarily one of them. But from what we can match up from the Pure-Blood Directory, Marlene McKinnon's copies of Witch Weekly, the prophet's reporting on death eater attacks and everything we can find on His supporters in Le Nouveau Monde, that's the best we can get together.

Dolohov, Malfoy, Rosier, Fawley, Carrow, Yaxley. One of them's got you. One of them's hurting you.

Having names and faces makes it all worse. I spent all of last night staring at the pictures we've gathered of them in the dark, right until Remus marched over from his bed and took them off me and told me he'll slip a sleeping draft into my morning pumpkin juice if I don't rest. He got caught staring at them after that, though, so who's winning? Neither of us ended up sleeping.

Almost all of them have got kids or nephews in the school. I very nearly told some of Padfoot's Army about it, about who we suspect, just to spill some shame in the water, to get Gryffindor on their backs and see these stupid kids squirm, just to get a tiny act of revenge, I guess. People would rain hell on them. But I can't stop thinking about that promise, so in the end, I managed to convince myself not to. It was a fucking struggle, though. I hate this ethics stuff. It was easier to just help good people and hurt bad people. But nothing's simple now.

Remus and I went to Dumbledore about it. He thanked us for the information and didn't give us any in return. I think he already knew. In fact, I think he thinks all three of us are

idiots for trying. Unfortunately for him, I don't have to listen to a bloody word he says, so that's that.

We're getting CLOSER!!! Keep up hope!!!!

Yours, always, all the time, every day, not a moment when I'm not,

Prongs.

It's two weeks before James' first OWL when it happens.

He's in Charms, furiously scribbling notes as Flitwick goes over past papers with them all, rattling through every past examination of the last ten years (they don't seem to change much, funny, that) when there's a firm knock at the classroom door and Professor McGonagall pokes her head in.

"Apologies for the interruption, Professor Flitwick," she says. "Mr. Potter, would you come with me?"

James looks up, disoriented. "Uh, sure, Professor." He scrambles to put his parchment away, capping his inkpot with numb hands and shuffling to the door after her.

He catches Remus and Lily watching him. *I'll be fine*, he mouths at them, and then steps out.

McGonagall doesn't speak as she leads him to her office. James spends the whole time listening to their footsteps in the quiet and wracking his brain for something he's done wrong. Nothing comes to mind immediately. Maybe she's figured out about Padfoot's Army, but surely she would have called Remus and Lily along if that was the case, too. Maybe it's for something old, some prank they all pulled when they

were fourteen that has only just been discovered. A dungbomb that went off two years late like an unexploded mine.

It becomes evident, when she sits him down across from her desk and closes the door behind them, that this isn't about a prank.

McGonagall looks older than usual, older by a decade or more, as she sits in her high-backed chair and surveys him. There's a letter open on her desk.

"Tea and a biscuit, Mr. Potter?" she offers.

That's about the last thing James had expected. "Uh... sure, professor. Sounds good."

She's got bourbons and custard creams. She pours them both a mug tea with only a dash of milk, just like James likes it. James chews on his custard cream and watches her. Outside of the window, a flock of migrating birds swells across the sky.

"Did I do something wrong, Professor?" James asks eventually.

McGonagall sighs very heavily. "No, Mr. Potter. You're not here for disciplinary purposes, don't worry. No, this is..." And she hesitates. "I've unfortunately received some bad news."

Immediately, ice-cold dread seeps down through James like poison. He grips the desk hard, trying not to let the room spin and pound around him like it does when he's panicking.

“Sirius,” he says, gasps it out so it sounds less like a name and more like blasphemy. “Is it Sirius? Is he alive? Did you get him out--”

She holds up a hand. “Unfortunately,” she says delicately, “We do not have any news on Mr. Black’s situation that we didn’t have before. Nothing has changed.”

James sags in his seat. Nothing could be worse than that, surely. “Thank Merlin.”

But McGonagall’s face doesn’t lighten. If anything, it creases further, dark and malformed, into something rotten by the sunlight through the window.

“James,” she says, delicately. The axe lifts. “There’s been a death eater attack at Godric’s Hollow. It happened this morning.”

All the air leaves James’ lungs. He stares.

“I’m so sorry,” McGonagall says. For the first time in the whole time he’s known her, James thinks she might cry, but she doesn’t. Just watches him with sad, rotten eyes.

“They’re...” No words. Nothing. He might as well be illiterate. He might as well be on another planet. “Are they at St. Mungos? Are they hurt?”

“By the time forces arrived to aid them,” McGonagall murmurs, “It was too late.”

“No.”

“Mr. Potter--”

"No!" James shouts. "That's-- no! You can't just say something like that, you can't--" He stands up and throws his bag against the wall like a child. "Professor, you can't... you can't..."

She doesn't scold him. Just watches and nods like she understands, which she doesn't, she never will. "I'm so sorry."

"It's not true," James says. "Please, it's... it's..." Strangled, he scrambles for something, anything to say to make it stop. To make the whole wretched thing go away. "They're strong, really strong, you can't know they're gone-- I want to see them for myself--"

"I'm sorry," she says again, simply. She seems to know there isn't much she can say.

"No, you're not!" James shouts. "You're not sorry! You and Dumbledore and all the others, every one of you, you're not sorry, you don't care!"

He darts across the room to the fireplace and lights it with a flick of his wand. There's a small pot of floo powder on the mantle and, without thinking, James grabs a handful and tosses it over the flames, which lash up at him, green and hypnotising, as if to say, *I could consume you*.

He fights the monster of it. "Potter House, Newport!" he shouts.

The emerald flames flicker for a second. Then, they fade back to red and gold.

"It was destroyed," McGonagall says, still sitting at the desk. "Mr. Potter, please sit--"

James hurls the pot of floo powder across the room with a shout and it smashes against the wall. "Sirius is gone!" he bellows. "And if they're gone too-- I can't take it, professor, not another person. Not two. Not now. Not after this fucking year. I fucking can't."

McGonagall doesn't flinch at the swearing. When she stands up, James goes still. She doesn't shout, though, doesn't lash out her wand. She just takes his arm and leads him gently back to the desk, sits him down.

Methodically, she makes another mug of tea. It sits, undrunk, next to the other. James watches his shaking hands.

"From what I understand," she says gently, after a long stretch of silence, "You have no living relatives?"

James shakes his head miserably. "No."

"The school is willing to help fund funeral costs and anything else--"

"I can do it," James says. He means to snap it but he just feels tired now, all the rage sapped out of him. "They left me everything. I think."

McGonagall nods, something very sad to it. "Yes, James, they did."

"Do I have to go deal with that?"

"Not if you don't want to," she says gently. "But if you would like to, you're entitled to a week away from school automatically, and you can appeal for more if you so wish--"

"I'll take the week," James says. And then it rushes up in him like a tidal wave and he curls up in the chair, arms wrapped around his stomach, and sobs.

Pads,

They're dead. My parents. Apparently some death eater found out about my mother's activism and... well. Dark Mark over the town and all. There wasn't much left of either of them.

I'm home now. It's not actually home. A muggle hotel in Godric's. Home home is gone. It could be rebuilt, a Ministry rep told me yesterday, but I don't want to. I don't know why.

I didn't tell Remus and Lily before I went. I haven't really talked to anybody about it. The feeling of it is bubbling around in my stomach and I think if I try to vocalise it I'll just end up vomiting grief and anger and fear and confusion and shock and hurt and bitterness and pain and loss everywhere. I've got five more days and then I have to go back to Hogwarts. Before that, I have to bury them. Their bodies are being portkeyed to me tomorrow afternoon.

I hired a muggle man to find a plot of land, coffins and all that. I want to bury them myself, though. There are people who want to come to the funeral but I'm not doing a fucking funeral. Not right now. Life feels like a funeral and I'm not making another one.

I didn't even reply to their letters. I'm a rotten person to my core and it should have been me, not them, and no promise is going to change that.

Prongs.

He buries them on a Sunday. All the sadness in the world seems to lash around him like a noose and he spends the whole time with that awful feeling behind his eyes like he might just start crying, but no tears fall. They lie in a joint grave in Godric's Hollow, headstone carved of white marble. Snowdrops curl around the stone as James finishes, sitting down in front of them in the dirt, even though it's summer.

He's sweaty and dirty and ragged. He wants to be a shooting star, a forest fire. Anything but a man.

When the owl lands on his shoulder, he doesn't flinch. It's Remus', and he's been expecting it. With fumbling hands, he unties the note and lets the owl flutter back off into the sky, dark against the blue.

James,

We finally learned why you're not here. I'm so sorry. I don't even know how to start saying it. I'm so, so sorry. It's awful.

I hope you're okay, or as okay as you can be, at least. Lily and I are keeping up the research without you here, so you don't need to worry about searching the papers. Are you going to be back before OWLs? If you want to give them a miss and resit next year, I won't blame you, not one bit. I can't even imagine how awful this is for you.

I owed my parents first, so I'm sorry this is late, but they said you can come stay with us over the summer. Our place is really small, so we would probably have to top-and-tail in my bed unless we can fit a mattress in my room, which I

don't know that we can. If you're okay with that, then I want you to come stay. I don't want you to be alone.

Lily sends all her love. She actually cried when she heard about it. I would have been shocked but I was crying, too. She thinks it's all so unfair. I think she really does like you, James, if that's any consolation to any of this, which somehow I doubt that it is after everything we've been through this past year. She seems to think you're trying, really trying. I'd believe it, too, I think.

Once OWLs and the school year are over, we'll have time to slow down. Things will get just a little easier. Okay?

I love you. We both do. Sirius, too.

- Remus Lupin.

James is supposed to go back to school on Thursday, and until then he spends most of his time lying on the hotel floor in a timeless sort of fugue state. He writes more letters to Sirius and balls them up and throws them away. He contemplates writing Remus back and then doesn't bother, and then feels like an asshole for it, because he knows Remus and Remus is bound to be worrying out of his mind.

The OWLs loom closer by the day. James imagines them a lot, Remus and Lily, studying together by the fire, cramming as the examination days draw closer. The library is probably more full than ever, and their whole year are probably running around with their heads shoved in their books, frantically exchanging study notes and cheating tips.

He feels almost like he's at the calm, quiet centre of a hurricane. James doesn't touch his study notes once in

those days. He brought them with him when he left school, and they sit in a backpack by the window. He looks at them a lot. But he doesn't touch them.

Lily sends a letter too. James doesn't read it. He wants to, but he just can't.

The hotel has pretty good room service, he discovers on his final night there, when he tries to stand up and the world goes black as the blood drains out of his head. The night draws in as he sits on the covers of the twin bed and chews down a burger and chips, slathered in vinegar and mustard. It's greasy and thick, sitting heavy in his stomach. He forces himself through it. *You can't die here. Not after this car crash of a year. God would laugh at the irony of it.*

After that, he takes a shower. Washes his face without looking himself in the eye in the mirror. Opens the window and sticks his head out over the muggle street and breathes in the hot summer evening air. Tries desperately, like it's a cure, to feel like a person again.

Unsurprisingly, it doesn't work.

Pads,

I'm going back to school today. They're sending a portkey via owl in a few hours to get me, and I'll be moving back into the Gryffindor boys' dorm tonight. Feels weird to call it that now. It's more like the Gryffindor Remus and James dorm now.

I don't know how I feel. Numb in a fragile sort of way. There's this weird feeling sitting on my throat like I'm constantly about three seconds away from crying, which sucks, because if I cry in front of Lily she's going to think

I'm a loser, and if I cry in front of Remus he's just going to get really sad about it, so I really want to be able to hold it together.

Sorry I haven't written to you much since it happened. I don't know what to say, let alone how to say it, so I've sort of settled for saying nothing. It sucks, though. Feeling like this is all some cruel joke. Whoever's up there has really got it in for me, haven't they? I got the girl and I don't even care about it because you're not here and she's nothing like I thought she was and now. Now.

Nobody heard or saw their last moments. That bit gets to me the most. I keep imagining it, what they might have said. What it might have been like.

I don't know, Sirius. I don't know what the fuck to do now. In movies and books when something bad happens it's to teach you a lesson, or to motivate you. To make you driven and angry and ready to fight. But I don't feel ready to fight, I don't even feel angry. I just want to lie down and never get up again. I want you here so we can yell and break stuff and do stupid things. I want everything to be like it was this time last year.

It hasn't sunk in. I'm scared that when it does, I'll still feel the same way. You know? I don't know if you know, actually. You hate your parents and I don't know if you've ever lost somebody. I don't think I ever asked. Does Regulus count? Were you two ever close? And now I'm sad because I never bothered to talk to you about that stuff and I might never get the chance.

And they're gone. I've got school friends and teachers and that's all I have. No family left. I don't know if that's the bit that's making me sad or if it's something else.

I don't know.

Yours, even now,

Prongs.

Remus lunges to his feet when James enters the dorm. He'd been lying on his bed reading a book before. It's nine PM and he obviously hadn't been expecting him.

"Hi," James murmurs. He lets his backpack fall off his shoulder. In muggle clothes, he feels like a poorly chosen decoration.

Remus drinks him in. Then, he pads across the room, bare feet soft on the carpet, and pulls James in, gripping him fiercely. Numb and tired, James hugs him back. They stand like that for a long time, swaying in the middle of the dorm, Remus' arms fisting in his shirt tighter and tighter, James' chin hooked over his narrow shoulder. Remus' knitted sweater smells like him, all old paper and ink. It feels like the closest thing to home there is.

There aren't any words that can be said to make this okay. Even if there were, James doubts Remus would say them, because the silence speaks louder than either of them could.

Remus pulls back just slightly. James tilts his head down so his chin digs in. *Don't leave yet*, he tries to say without saying it.

"Okay," Remus murmurs. "Come on."

They pile onto James' bed together, Remus sitting back against the headboard with James in the loop of his long

arms. It reminds James, bizarrely, of a muggle movie he saw with Sirius years ago, a scene where two girls cuddled to watch TV together after a nasty breakup. Casual, desperate comfort.

James breathes in that smell again. "You can tell her I'm back."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. She deserves to know."

"She's been worried about you." One of Remus' spindly hands spiders up James' shoulder to play with the hair at the nape of his neck, twirling it around his fingers again and again. "I think having you gone made her realise how much she likes spending time with you, if I'm honest. She really does like you."

"I don't care much," James admits. "I'm glad she's my friend. She's great like that. Says cool things."

"Yeah."

"Maybe I can start dating her in a few years. When things are less awful."

Remus laughs soft and throaty. His warm thumb drifts behind James' ear. "Yeah, maybe." Something in his voice seems to say, *you've changed while not changing at all*.

They lie together for a long time. At some point, Remus scribbles a note to Lily and spells it to flutter over to the girls' dorm, something short and uncomplicated. Then, he puts his wand on the floor and goes back to cradling James' head like it's something precious. Something worth protecting.

“I hate that things are so unfair,” he says to James after the silence has loosened its hold on them both. “I hate that he’s gone and they’re gone, now, too. I hate that I keep waiting to see him again even though I know I might never get to. I hate that there’s a war. I hate that we have to do this.”

James says nothing. He curls his arms around Remus’ stomach and tries to force the nausea away.

“I hate that I’m making this about me, too.”

“It is about you,” James says. He out over the room, out towards the window, through which soft, half-moonlight drifts. “If it’s about me, it’s about you.”

Remus squeezes him. His hand doesn’t still in his hair. “You gonna get back to cramming with us tomorrow?” he asks gently.

James considers the question. “No,” he admits, because he’s tired. Because he’s aching. Because all he wants to do is be something, anything, other than what he is. “No, I don’t think I can.”

“Okay,” Remus whispers. He flicks his wrist and the lights dim. They shuffle down under the covers together, still dressed, both of them half-lit, both of them doomed.

“Okay?” James clarifies.

Remus nods. He rubs the pad of his thumb along the space beside James’ eye, something awful in it. “Okay.”

Chapter End Notes

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SOUTH WALES

Chapter Notes

this damn fic lives in my head without rent
enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Pads,

You'll be glad to know I'm staying with Remus and his family over the break. School let up yesterday and we got the Hogwarts Express back to London. Remus' dad is great, real proper Welsh bloke with the accent and everything. His mother's nice, too, in that way mothers are to their kids' friends. I don't see them much.

Remus told me he doesn't want me to be alone. I didn't really know how to take it at the time. I think I thought it was, like, a worry thing, for a while. Like he was scared I'd hurt myself or disappear or do something stupid if left to my own devices. Now it just sort of makes me tired to think about. Because I don't really know which of us spends more time worrying about the other, y'know? Whether it's me or him that's sticking our neck out far enough that it'll break.

Anyway. That's enough of that morbid stuff. I've been trying to pull myself out of the hole I've been in, can you tell? It's not really working that well, if I do say so myself, though definitely not for lack of motivation. Maybe just for lack of effort. I didn't spend that long being sad about the fucking disaster that was OWLs, so that's something, I suppose. I don't know if it's a good sign or a bad one, if I'm honest. I'm just glad I don't have yet another thing on my mind.

They really were as awful as I said, by the way. I don't want you to do what the others are all doing, which is saying that I'm overreacting and it can't really be that bad, which isn't true. It is that bad. I think Remus has forgotten that I'm a self-centred arsehole prick who will big himself up at any chance he gets. If I could be bragging right now, I would be. But I've got nothing to brag about, not concerning all that. Here's to hoping I've scraped by with enough passing grades to make it to next year. What do they do to students who fail their OWLs? Do they get held back a year? Azkaban? Public execution? I've never heard of anybody failing them all before. Guess there's a first for everything.

Anyway.

We haven't made much progress on finding you, but there's still hope. The Rosiers have a big, important wedding in a few weeks, and I'm in the process of trying to track down somebody, anybody, who would take me as a plus-one. Just so I can scout the place out, y'know?

And, uh. Don't hate me. But I think the person I'm close to settling on... you're not going to like it. Unfortunately, I don't make a habit of listening to you when you tell me I'm making stupid decisions. And you're not exactly here to tell me not to, so...

Don't be mad at me. Please.

Love,

Prongs.

Remus lives on the coast of South Wales, in a tiny little seaside town without a name. There are two castle ruins nearby -- one to the east, one to the west -- and lots of

winding rivers carving their way down from the mountains, and the sea roars nearby constantly, the sound of it never far away. It's hazy often. Lights blink on the shore of Somerset across the channel like small, bright ghosts.

They aren't far from Swansea here, but neither of them feels particularly up for a day-trip apparently. For the first two weeks, Remus and James spend most of their time walking, exploring the local area meticulously. They map out the coastal path in all the directions it goes, and they climb the rocks of each of the points where the flat, green cliffs jut down to meet the ocean, and they find fields of sheep and sit on the fences and feed them handfuls of stale bread stolen from the food bin.

A lot of the walking is just to find some way to feel purposeful. Neither of them has much energy, Remus fatigued with the cycle and James with grief, so they usually don't go too far, no more than a few hours out, before finding a flat stretch of sand or grass or rock to lie on, looking out over the still, grey water and not talking much.

The quiet of it is consuming. Houses like Remus', white and dark-roofed with small windows, are splattered across the coast, but none of them are close enough together to constitute much of a community. It doesn't feel tight-knit in the way you imagine small towns are supposed to when you read about them in books.

"You should read this after me," Remus comments one day. It's mid-afternoon and they're sitting together on the roof of an old WWII bunker overlooking the sea. Out in front of them stretches a wide, dull expanse of dry grass spotted with sheep, a stoop little stone wall and the ocean.

James squints over at him through the sun. "What?"

“Atwood. She’s a muggle author.” Remus shows James the cover of *The Handmaid’s Tale*. “It’s not perfect, but it’s a nice classic to start off with, if you want something interesting and... socially pertinent.”

James thinks hard, trying to remember the last time he made it seem like he would want to read anything socially pertinent. Still, he nods, maybe just to make Remus happy. “Yeah. Yeah, totally. Let me know when you’re done with it.”

Remus smiles faintly and nods. All squinty-eyed and sun-bright, he looks more like he’s grimacing as he hoists the book back over his face and keeps reading.

James runs a hand over the warm concrete beneath him. A few strings of rusted old barbed wire whine in the wind nearby.

After a while, Remus tries to initiate another conversation. Bless him, honestly. One of these days, James will actually work up the nerve to thank him for all the shit he does.

“You heard from Pete at all since school let out?” Like they’re not living in the same house, getting their owls at the same time.

James shrugs. “Nah. You?”

“No.” Remus sighs. He drops his book onto his face and folds his arms. “I worry about him sometimes. On top of everything else, I mean.”

“At least Lily’s stayed in touch.” As, indeed, she has. She owls them almost every day. It’s a sort of rhythm -- her letters arrive by dawn, and Remus and James put together their reply and send it off by nightfall. It’s an easy,

melancholy sort of routine. There isn't much to talk about, but they find conversation anyway, the three of them, and if that doesn't say a lot about their relationship to one another, James doesn't know what does.

"We need to finish a letter back to her this evening," Remus nods. He squints out from over the top of *The Handmaid's Tale* at James. "We should start on the potions homework sometime, too. It's best to get the worst over with first, right?" *And if you've passed anything, it's probably potions, because at least that was a practical exam rather than a written one*, Remus doesn't say, but James hears it loud and clear anyway.

"Yeah."

"Yeah."

James sits up. He plants his hands under himself, staring out intently into the bright, sunlit ocean. At the cliffs below, the blue-grey water goes ashy brown with the folding light. It's a sparkling miasma and even now, it's still striking.

"I like it here," he says, trying to mean it.

Remus smiles kindly at him. "Me, too."

"Good." James cracks a smile. "Don't know how long your parents'll keep me, but... I'd like to stay."

It's the first time they've really breached it. The idea of staying. The permanency of it is one of the scariest things that's happened since the attack at Godric's Hollow, which is saying a lot.

"Good," Remus echoes. "I'd like that." And that's that.

Remus' parents work a lot, tireless and exhaustive. His mother is a social worker who takes night classes in the next town over, a squat little village spread out over a muddy valley. James has seen her twice since he got here, and only one of those times constituted a conversation, the other just a hurried greeting as she headed out to work early. His dad's a Ministry man. Something to do with Magical Law Enforcement. He's not around much, either.

The relative freedom it affords them is nice. If it had been a year earlier, James might have proposed they throw a party. Now, it's just nice to get some peace.

That evening, they trek sore-footed and tired-eyed back to the house together. They reach home at sunset, around 10PM, and nobody's home, the cottage dark and empty. They pile through the door and shuck their muddy shoes off into the boiler cupboard under the stairs, and Remus sets about heating up canned soup as James nabs the first shower. Orange sunlight filters through all the small windows. There's always a draft in this house. It's old-timey, all the locks from about seventy years ago. It makes James feel like he's in a muggle period movie, or just back at Hogwarts.

James stands under the hot, trickly shower for a while. Then, he dries off and shuffles into a pair of Remus' pyjamas, about a size too big for him, and pads down to the small kitchen.

They eat their soup by the window in silence. Every day has been like this. It's nice, having a routine.

Remus takes a shower. James washes the dishes. They lock up the house and close all the curtains. Then, they shuffle

into Remus' camp bed together.

It's far too small for the both of them, especially with how tall Remus has been getting lately, having a good head on James, though even Pete was taller than James the last time they saw him, so James has resigned himself to being the second shortest Marauder now, only beating out Sirius on that front. They make it work, though. Remus lies curled up against the far wall, hogging one of the two flat little pillows and the quilt, because he's naturally freezing with his awful circulation. James lies closer to the window, wrapped up tight in Remus' tartan blanket, watching the night sky. He always tries to find the Dog Star and never quite manages it.

"G'night, James," Remus whispers.

"G'night, Remus," James whispers back.

Dear Andromeda Black,

Okay, please hear me out. Before you close this letter, I mean. I know most people read the name at the end first, so you know who this is from, and I know you probably don't know who I am, but I need you to listen to me.

My name's James. I'm a sixth (sort of) year at Hogwarts, and I'm a Gryffindor. I share(d) a dorm with Sirius, your cousin, for four years. And we've been trying to track him down since he disappeared. He's my best friend and it kills me to think of anything bad happening to him. Me and some other friends have been giving everything we've got to the search, and we think we've got a lead.

One of the houses we think he might be being held at is Rosier Manor, which is the location of a huge wedding this

summer. I know you're pretty estranged, but being still technically a Black, you're not disowned yet, right? You still get invites to stuff like that, right? We figured out that your mother used to be a Rosier. That means you get an invite, right?

We have a friend who can brew polyjuice. If you get me in as your plus-one, I can do some poking around. Not a full-scale rescue mission or anything. Just... something. Y'know. To get us SOMEWHERE.

Please consider it. Please. Please. I hate to beg, and he would hate to see me beg, but you might be our last chance. It's been more than a year. I'm terrified. And so is he, I know it.

Sincerely,

James Fleamont Potter.

Dear James Potter,

I would like to discuss such a proposal in private, if this is possible. Would you be available to meet me in room thirteen of The Leaky Cauldron on Sunday, 3PM sharp? I have means to ensure our conversation is not overheard.

Bring only those you can trust. This is quite a gamble I'm taking. Do not make me regret it.

Sincerely,

Andromeda Druella Black.

“And you’re sure you got it to her and not some other Black relative?” Lily asks.

James nods. He glances up and down Diagon Alley again. Nobody seems to be listening in, but with the current climate, it’s increasingly difficult to tell. It feels like there are eyes and ears everywhere.

The three of them are sitting outside of a small, quaint ice cream parlour on a corner winding into the Alley. Lily looked intimidated by her choco-mint sundae when it arrived, but Remus has been helping her make a dent in it. James feels too sick to try.

“Yeah,” James says, and leans in conspiratorially. “Yeah, I’m almost positive. Bullet’s smart like that.”

“You’re positive because your owl is smart,” Lily says dubiously. She offers one of the numerous chocolate wafer swirls on the rim of the glass to Remus, who accepts with a tense smile.

“Yeah. She’s never failed me before.”

“Right.”

“I’m inclined to agree with James,” Remus offers gently. “Not that I think this isn’t a ridiculous, awful idea. But if it was some murderous pureblood fanatic trying to trick him... I don’t think The Leaky Cauldron would be the ideal place.”

Lily shrugs. “I don’t know. It’s private enough.”

“Not private enough to murder and get away with it.”

"People get murdered in muggle hotel rooms all the time. And they could have invited you here, somewhere in the wizarding world, to get your guard down, James."

James shrugs. His shoulders are starting to ache with the motion, or maybe that's just the tension that sits between them all the time now. "It's... it's complicated. I can just *feel* that this is going to be a good move. I can just tell. Y'know? Like a proper gut feeling."

"And those have always been right."

James winches. He's not the one with the killer instincts of their group -- that was always Sirius -- but he's always thought they were pretty good. "Most of the time."

Lily hugs her stomach. She meets James' eyes. "I don't like this. I really don't."

"I know."

"I don't think we should go."

"You don't have to--" James starts.

Remus shoots him a warning look. "I think if one of us goes, all of us should go," he says, before Lily can say it. "For protection. You know. In case something does go wrong."

Looking vindicated, Lily nods furiously. "Yes! Yes, exactly, Remus. We're safer together. If you're really going to insist on this, then I'm coming with you."

"So long as you're sure," James concedes. For a moment, as he looks at the two of them -- Remus worn and tired from the recent moon, Lily hard-jawed and sharp and ready to do whatever she has to do -- he doesn't see school children.

They look like revolutionaries. They look like they would go to war for this.

He wonders when all of them grew up so much. It doesn't feel like a victory.

"I'm sure," Lily confirms.

Remus doesn't need to say anything. He just nods. He would do anything, James knows then. Anything. There isn't a limit to how far he'd go.

As the clock ticks closer to three, they finish their sundae. As a small unit, almost a platoon, the three of them stand and head for The Leaky Cauldron. The air around them bleeds tension. This could be the end of him, James knows. He doesn't even have the sense to be scared. It'll only be the millionth time in the past year.

Dark bruise. Dark bruise on the back of his neck. Cellar. Chains.

James shakes it away. If there's an inopportune time for a panic attack, it's now.

It's quiet inside the Leaky Cauldron. Hogwarts students haven't started shopping for the new term yet, so there are no families on outings, no young muggleborns stumbling around wide-eyed with their families. Just a tired bartender and a few estranged-looking patrons scattered through the tavern.

James, Lily and Remus make for the stairs. Together, they shuffle up, trying to look like they belong. James keeps a hand on his wand and the other tucked into his pocket, clutched around the mirror. It's sort of a comfort these days.

Room thirteen is unassuming from the outside. It's noiseless and plain. You wouldn't pick it apart from the rest if asked to find the door holding a murderous dark wizard.

James feels Lily and Remus take station at his shoulders. Drawing a deep breath, he raises his fist and knocks twice.

For a moment, silence. Then, quiet footsteps. The door opens.

The woman on the other side looks startlingly like Sirius. Her hair is curlier than his, and a few shades lighter, landing on a sort of ashy brown; she's white where Sirius is half-Korean on his father's side. Her curls are tied back off her severe face, and she's got the same sharp, haughty features as the rest of her family, but softer and more blemished, less like polished marble and more human. She's shorter than Remus but stands eye-to-eye with James, which would make her just a little taller than Sirius.

A wand in his face. "What's my cousin's favourite muggle band?"

James does his very best not to tense up. "Queen. He likes Keep Yourself Alive best. Wants to get their songs on vinyl someday, one of those cool muggle record players."

The wand hesitates at his jaw, then falls. Andromeda Black nods, satisfied. "Come in."

James hesitates. "Anybody could have lied about that."

"They could. But you think one of my family in disguise could name a muggle celebrity?" Andromeda snorts. "If there's one thing my family never paid attention to about Sirius, it's what makes him happy. Now come in, all of you. We can't afford to be overheard."

James, Remus and Lily shuffle inside. The room is modest. Four transfigured chairs sit around a stout table at the window. Andromeda gestures for them all to sit, then begins casting a web of intricate silencing spells over the door and walls.

Lily and James exchange looks. Neither of them interrupts. James assumes that Andromeda has probably got good reason to be paranoid that her family are watching her every move. If they're anything like Sirius' parents...

"I don't know much, before you ask," she says when she turns around. With an elegant sort of ease, she pockets her wand. Under her muggle sweatshirt, there's still something painfully aristocratic about the way she holds herself.

"Not much is better than nothing," James says. "What do you know?"

She takes her seat closest to the window. Silhouetted by the light of day, she looks almost like a statue. "Let's see. I know he's been missing for just over a year. I know it's because he... well. He got into some argument with his family at the beginning of the holidays, did something to hurt the Dark Lord. Evidently not enough, seeing as he's still kicking, but something. Enough to scare him. And the Dark Lord has him cooped up in my darling grandfather's old manor."

James explodes out of his seat. "You know where he is?!"

Andromeda pins him with a withering look. After a moment, as if she's caught herself, it softens. "Sit. Let me get my cards on the table."

Reluctantly, James sits. His heart thrums against his ribs. He wants nothing more than to break out into a grin, or to cry, or something similarly stupid. But he can't. Not yet.

“Please. Go ahead,” he says.

Andromeda clears her throat. “My mother is a descendent of the Rosier family. She was the second eldest child and the eldest daughter, and marrying into the Black family was a political venture more than it was anything else. In the culmination of World War II, a lot of the Sacred Twenty-Eight bought houses in muggle areas. They told themselves it was temporary, to keep themselves out of the way of potential muggle conflicts, with their large country houses and the government knocking at their doors, suspicious of draft-dodging. After the war, most moved back out into the countryside. Some families, like the Blacks, stayed in the cities, using their country manors as social hotspots or honeymoon houses.”

“Honeymoon houses?” Lily asks.

“A custom among Pureblood families to offer newlywed heirs... starter homes. Thing of it like an informal loan.”

“What do they pay back in return?”

Andromeda smiles crookedly. There are years of pain in that smile. “Allegiance.”

“Oh.”

“Indeed.” She clears her throat. “The Rosier Family, my mother’s, were much the same as the Blacks. Their ancestral home is an old regency-era mansion in the upper-class stretches of northern Hampshire. Beautiful and hollow. Nobody had lived there for years when my mother married Cygnus Black, and it was offered to them as a parting gift to the Rosiers’ eldest daughter.”

James and Remus exchange long looks. Remus hooks his ankle around James' under the table. Seems to say with it, *I'm here. I'm here. I'm not going anywhere.*

"My dear old mother loved the place." Andromeda snorts. "My sister and I were both born there. Before Narcissa was conceived, however, my mother and father had a falling-out with the Rosiers that resulted in them repossessing the house. My mother and father moved us all into the old Black Mansion, and Pierre and Edna Rosier moved into Rosier Mansion, and that was that."

James squints at the table. "Pierre Rosier. I know that name."

Andromeda nods. There's a glint in her eye like she knows James is catching on. "My uncle. He's a rather nasty fellow. The current head of the Rosier House. Vicious. Militant. A blood purist."

It hits him. "He's the editor for *Le Nouveau Monde*."

Remus gasps faintly. "Oh, bloody hell. You're right."

"He's more than that," Andromeda says grimly. "I'd say his journalistic work is quite the footnote to his extensive resume."

James leans across the table. "Tell me."

"I think you know."

And it hits him again. Harder. A truck. A train. James is going to leave here with bruises. "He's a death eater. A high-up death eater, for all the information he's got."

"Bingo."

“You-know-who’s right hand?”

“Something like that, perhaps.” Andromeda’s piercing silver gaze scans James’ face, drinking in each inch of him. “I know quite a bit about the rise of recent Dark Lords. You get to know how they think when you grow up like I did. Sirius and I, we’re quite similar, and I’d be willing to wager that Sirius is being kept with a man like that because Voldemort doesn’t want him out of his sight for a moment. Because Sirius knows how he thinks, too, and that scares Voldemort. And whatever secret he figured out, he did it because he knows how men like the Dark Lord behave. The way they move. Being predictable scares men like that.”

“He’s sixteen,” James says. An excuse. A rebuttal. Something. It comes out almost like a prayer.

“And he’s smarter than most people give him credit for.”

James thinks back. Dark bruise, stark against a pale neck. “Yeah,” he says.

Andromeda clicks each of the knuckles in her fingers one at a time. “He’s in that house somewhere.”

And another train. A plane, maybe. “And you know your way around that house. You grew up there”

She grins then. “Got it, Potter.”

“And-” It all falls into place. “Polyjuice. Oh, fuck, polyjuice.”

“Yes.”

“That could work.”

“It would be tricky,” Andromeda warns.

"I'm a good actor," James says, even though that's a horrendous lie.

Andromeda raises her eyebrows at him. "Yeah?"

"I can be good. If I have to be."

Staring between them both like it's a tennis match, Lily speaks up. "What are you two talking about?"

"This will be my first opportunity to get into that house in years," Andromeda says, turning to her. There's something very feral about her face as she says it. "And if I know my family, and I do, they've got Sirius in the wine cellar. And if James can take my place at the wedding, I could sneak off..."

And James bolts to his feet. "I've got an invisibility cloak!" he shouts.

Andromeda startles, hand halfway to her wand. Then, a sharp smile spreads across her face. "Perfect."

Pads,

Okay, so, we've got two weeks to prepare.

I wanted to sit down and write the whole plan out for you, but we just got home (to Remus' place, that is) and I've realised I'm bloody exhausted, but I'll feel bad if I don't write you today, so. That's that. You're getting a letter, even if it's short and weird and vague. When you read this, you'll know what happened then, anyway. Or if you don't, I can just tell you. God, I have so much to tell you about.

Andromeda's really nice. Nice in a scary sort of way. She's got something mad about her, like you when you're happy or angry or sad. Something sort of insane, just a little bit. Suppose that's the inbreeding, I guess. She looks like you, too, and it made me sort of sad to see your face and your eyes on somebody else. Regulus looks like you, too, but in a different sort of way that makes him look like a stranger, too.

Weird how long it's been since we saw that kid, too. Sometimes I think about him, sitting in Durmstrang, learning Nordic magic. In my head it's sort of quaint. I think that's because when I think of Northern Europe I think, like, salted liquorice and sweet pretzels and mild whiskey. Not darkness and strictness.

I'm getting off topic. We (Remus and Lily and I) met with Andromeda and it was a success. And I'll write the whole plan out to you some time that isn't now, soon, but for now, just know that we're all very optimistic about this. It's the first real lead we've had this whole time. Lily thinks we should tell Dumbledore. I think he can go suck a dick. Remus is somewhere in the middle, which sort of translates like he thinks Dumbledore can suck a dick while reading our letter to him, which is a funny mental image. I don't know what I'm saying anymore.

I'm going mad too, I think. Sucks.

Love you.

Prongs.

"It's going to be *big*," Remus says two days later, when the newest copy of *Witch Weekly* arrives by owl. They lug

backpacks full of fruit and newspapers and notebooks out to a field nearby and sit in the grass together to read.

James glances over from his spot on the turf. "What?"

"Look." Remus shuffles over so their shoulders brush, holding the spread above their heads so they can stare up at it together. "Look, there. They've published the guest list."

It's huge. James stares, unable to take it in. Lines upon lines upon lines upon lines of dense black ink. They haven't been picky with their attendees.

It's ludicrously long. Longer than it feels there are wizards and witches in Britain.

Something about it doesn't sit right with James. "Seems a little long for a wedding?" he asks.

Remus shrugs, obviously not struck by the same sort of concern. "Maybe. I don't... I'm not quite sure. I mean, all these pureblood types affairs are full of wizards from all over the world, right? Or maybe they're just buffing out the guest list to seem more relevant. I wouldn't put it past them.

James nods absently, not paying full attention. "Yeah."

"What's wrong?"

"What?" James shakes himself. "I'm okay. Just..." He holds out a hand. "Gimme that page? I wanna fully look it over sometime."

Hesitantly, Remus tears it out and hands it to James. "Be careful with it. I'm not re-buying this issue."

"Right. Got it." James takes it, folds it gently into his pocket. "You still writing to him?"

He doesn't need to clarify who he means. Remus stiffens, then nods. "Sometimes. I feel like a bad person sometimes when I go a while without, so... I always end up going back to it."

"Me, too."

"He probably won't read any of them." Seeming to realise that it came out quite morbid, Remus backtracks. "When we get him back, I mean. He won't read any of them. He'll just laugh and tell us to tell him ourselves. Y'know. Couldn't pay him to sit down and read something that big."

"Yeah. Yeah, of course." James sighs. "I can imagine it now. The look on his face as I hand him the box I keep the letters in. I imagine it a lot."

"Me, too." Remus clears his throat. "It sort of makes it all worse, in a way, doesn't it? To think that it's been long enough that he's going to be different by the time we see him again. Really different. Not the same person he was. Makes me wish he was stuck in a bloody coma or something. Anything other than this."

James doesn't know quite what to say to that. "You were more optimistic than me. At the start." He doesn't mean for it to come out sounding like an accusation, it just does.

Remus doesn't seem to mind much. He just sighs, rolling his head around to look at James. "I think I was a lot of things I'm not anymore a year ago. You, too. I don't think you realise how much you've changed, sometimes."

"Good changes?"

Remus considers him. "You're less happy now."

"But less awful."

"But less awful," Remus concedes. He cracks a smile. "By a bare margin."

"Oh, come off it. You find me far more fun to be around now that I'm less of an ass."

"And now that we're--" And Remus cuts himself off halfway into the word. Tight and sort of questioning, like he doesn't know if he gets to say it. "Y'know."

"Something?" James offers.

"Something," Remus agrees.

"Wonder what Lily thinks of us."

Remus laughs at that, properly laughs, like it's hilarious. When James shoots him a confused look, he only laughs harder, clutching his stomach, faced upturned towards the sun. He's got a bit of a sunburn from the last few days, rare for South Wales, reddish against his nose and cheeks. He's lovely.

"You're a piece of work, you know that?" he asks James, less a question and more an imperative. What he's demanding, James doesn't know. *Kiss me*, maybe, like he did outside of the Padfoot's Army meeting what feels like years ago. *I don't want you to be alone.*

"I try," James says indulgently.

"And you succeed."

"Why, thank you."

"I don't know what I'd do without you," Remus replies. It's just another stitch of their banter, but it makes James pause.

"Me, neither," he says, and grins, properly grins, for the first time since McGonagall gave him the news. Then, indeed, "Kiss me?"

Pads,

Preparation, preparation, preparation. I've been tearing through the guest list for the wedding and it doesn't make sense. None of it makes sense. Remus and I already talked it through, and he thinks I'm reading too much into it, but why did the Rosiers invite families outside of the Sacred Twenty-Eight? Why did they invite known opponents of you-know-who?

And why in Merlin's name is DUMBLEDORE on there?? Does he even exist in the summer holidays??? I'd always assumed he just shells himself off into a cocoon over the hols, honestly. At least, I didn't think he made a habit of attending weddings.

Andromeda told me, when I saw her, that this wedding is going to outgrow itself. That it's important, more important than I know. That sounds like BS, or it did at the time. Now, I'm starting to believe her.

Fuck, Sirius. This is getting really sticky. Not sure how I'll get through it, but I'll keep surviving. I sort of have to, don't I?

I love you. I'm coming.

Prongs.

On the night before the wedding, Lily takes the train over to Bridgend and then a bus across the coast. Remus and James pick her up from a nearby town and, by the orange sunset, the three of them walk back to Remus' place together, talking through their plan. The one-lane roads through the fields are dead quiet, and they don't bother keeping off the concrete, walking down towards the sparkling sea without much regard for anything but each other and the huge, terrifying thing that looms before them. Tomorrow.

"It's not too late to tell her you're not okay with this, you know," Remus says. It's about the last thing James expected him to say. "If you want to pull out, you can."

James does his best not to snap at him. "I don't want to, though."

"I know that. I just don't want you to die, so." There's not much heart in it, though, and eventually, Remus sighs. "I know we're doing this. I don't really want to talk you out of it, either. But... you know what I mean."

James nods. He's awful, rotten to the core, but he's scared of losing somebody else, too. It almost makes him feel like a good person, which has been hard since everything with his parents. "I do."

"I could always take your place," Lily offers. "Y'know. It's polyjuice. It could be any of us."

But James shakes his head. "It can't be you."

"Because I'm muggleborn?"

He winces. "No, because I care about you. It has to be me. I'm not putting anybody in danger."

Lily snorts. "How noble of you."

"It's true."

She rolls her eyes. James isn't sure whether she believes him or not, but she drops it.

"I'll be fine," he says, more to himself than to either of them. "I'm gonna be just fine. It's not like it's the most dangerous thing we've done, right?"

Remus doesn't correct him, but the truth -- that it is, in fact, the most dangerous thing they've done -- rings loud between them all. "Sure," he says instead. "Yeah."

James turns to catch Lily's eye, maybe to tell a joke, but she's staring off towards the ocean with such a wondrous look on her face that he doesn't want to interrupt. Golden sunlight catches her face and as the three of them mount the hill they've been climbing, she stops, looking out over the channel. It's hazy today, bright and dull like a moonstone.

Remus and James stop, too. For a while, they all just stand there in the middle of the road, watching the sea. Watching the waves crash on the rocky cliffs. Watching the green grass ripple in the wind. Remus takes James' hand.

It just feels like if there's one place lost souls migrate to, it's the coast of South Wales, mainland England stretching long and spectral across the horizon, ships slipping silently through to Newport and Cardiff like whales.

That night, the three of them sit on Remus' bed and go over the plan over and over. Lily's brought the polyjuice with her, whipped up in her garage back in the Midlands, and yesterday, Andromeda owled over the hair they'll need -- a few strands of her own, and a few strands of a muggle stranger's.

"And you're sure she said half-past nine?" Lily asks again.

James nods. "Half-nine, same room of the Leaky Cauldron. She said to bring dress robes."

Remus waves that off. "We can transfigure your school robes into something passable once you're there."

"Right."

"It's gonna be fine."

"Right." James doesn't believe it for a moment. Still, he nods along.

By the faint lamplight, silhouetted against the dark window, Lily looks older than she's ever looked before. Tired.

"I don't have a good feeling about this," she says. "I don't want you going in there alone."

"I won't be alone. Not with her there."

"When she goes off to explore, it'll just be you in the snake pit," Lily counters.

"Maybe. But it's a wedding. It's not like they're going to try to murder me."

"You never know with these people," Remus offers glumly.

But Lily is shaking her head. "I think we all know it won't just be a wedding. Did you see the guest list? There are wanted criminals on there, James."

James startles. "Like who?"

Lily raises her chin. "Bellatrix Black. Cousin of the bride. She's wanted for the torture of a muggle couple in the winter. She used the cruciatus curse on them."

Remus shudders. James, too. "Oh," James says lamely. "I didn't even notice that."

Lily taps the side of her forehead with a finger. "Small details, Potter."

"They have to know they're going to get raided by aurors, though? That guest list was public."

And that's where Lily's face folds into something grim and terrible. She meets James' gaze, then Remus', and then she looks out of the window towards the darkening sea, staring through the wind-lashed glass of the small pane.

"There are two options," Lily says softly "Either they're so cocky they think the aurors won't try, or this is... this is bait."

Pads,

Night before. Lily's sleeping on the sofa downstairs and Remus is writing his letter to you next to me. It's a bit of a nightly ritual for us, sitting together and writing to you. It's nice in a morbid sort of way. He keeps his letters for you in an old wine box, wooden with one of those lids you slide over the top, splintery bits all peeling off the sides. I keep

mine tied up with old shoelaces. It's a pretty thick stack, after all this time.

I think I'm finally starting to understand Lily better. At least, that's what I've taken to telling myself. She's less of an enigma than she's ever been. She's angry, and she's scared, and I think she's known for a lot longer than I have that a war is coming. It scares her but not as much as it scares me, so I guess she's braver than I am. Doesn't take much.

Remus' letters are so damn long. He puts me to shame. He caught me looking over his shoulder and started laughing. I didn't read much. Something about being sorry, something about me, something about Wales. Bet he's waxing poetic over you, isn't he? He was always the more artistic one. You would laugh at me if you were here right now. Make some joke about kicked puppies. It wouldn't be funny and I would laugh anyway.

Fuck! I'm so fucking bloody tired of being bloody sad all the time!!

I can't afford to mope right now. I just can't. I have to sleep, and sleep well, and then get my head on straight for tomorrow so I don't run off and do something I regret, okay? That's what I need to do.

I know it's improbable, and nothing to do with the actual plan, but I can't stop wondering if I'll actually, properly see you tomorrow. In the flesh. If Andromeda can get you out (which she thinks she can't, but she seems like a pessimist, so I think she might be able to) then it'll be the first time in more than a year. You'll be right there. We can take you back to Remus' place on the coast and show you all our cool new hangout spots. You can make friends with Lily.

The four of us can spend time together. We can get the Marauders back together!! Wouldn't that be dope!

It's going to be good. If we can get there. And between you and I, I'm not beyond doing something reckless for it. Even if it makes Andromeda hate me. She can bloody well hate me all she likes. I don't have a lot left to lose.

Lily and Remus have both offered to take my place. Lily earlier and Remus just now. How do I tell them, without saying it, that if I lose another person I might just fucking... I don't know. Go mad. Lose my head.

Bloody hell. Tomorrow, right?

I love you. I'm ON MY WAY TO YOU!

Prongs.

By the cool morning sunlight, the three of them sneak out together. They walk all the way back to the main road and catch the Knight Bus, and then sit, quiet and morose like a funeral procession, in the back window together. James offers to pay for the trip. Neither Remus nor Lily seems to really be in the mood to fight over it, so they agree, and that's that.

The Leaky Cauldron is quiet and empty. They creep back up to room thirteen and Andromeda is already there, sitting still and contemplative in the window, watching the sun rise over London. A train rattles by on an overground rail across the other side of the muggle street.

"Hey," James says, as Remus gets to work transfiguring his robes into something passable. "Is everything set up?"

“So long as you’ve got the polyjuice potion, yes,” Andromeda nods. She stands up, drawing herself up to her full height, and silhouetted against the pale daylight, she looks so much like him that it almost hurts to look at her.

“We’re good for it,” James nods. “Though being you is going to be a challenge. Not that you’re like, weird. You know.”

She laughs faintly, a little distracted. “Yes. Yes, I imagine it won’t be easy. I would just say this: avoid anybody that looks particularly... related to me.”

“I know what his parents look like,” James nods. “And I think I’ve seen Druella and your dad before.”

“Do you know Lucius Malfoy?” Andromeda asks.

“Yeah, I think so. He was a seventh-year when we were firsties. Nasty piece of work.”

“And Narcissa?”

James winces, remembering the letter. “Yeah, I think I could pick her out of a crowd.”

“Good. So long as you can avoid her and my other sister, Bellatrix, along with the rest of the Black clan, you should be fine,” Andromeda says, almost flippant, not quite.

Lily inches closer to James. “So Bellatrix Black is really going to be there?” she asks, scandalised.

Andromeda snorts. “She’s a bridesmaid, I think.”

“But the aurors...”

She looks Lily up and down, a little askance. “Put the dots together, have you? She’s smart, this one.”

“Didn’t take much to figure it out.” Lily’s arm brushes James’ and it doesn’t feel like an electric shock. More like a chthonic toll.

“Still. You have to know what it means.”

“Yes.” Lily clears her throat. “This is more than a wedding, isn’t it?”

“It is,” Andromeda agrees coolly. “And if you want to stop now, I’ll let you.”

Of course, it’s not actually a question. A challenge, maybe. James steps forwards, almost tripping over Remus’ foot. “I don’t want to stop.”

“James--” Remus starts.

James speaks over him “I don’t want to stop.”

“Okay,” Andromeda says approvingly. “Me, neither. I’m really sticking my neck out for you here, Potter. Don’t make me regret it.”

“It’s not for me,” James says shakily. He rubs his thumb over the mirror in his pocket. “It’s for him.”

“I suppose it is,” Andromeda agrees. “Now come on. Get those robes on and we’ll take our first dose of polyjuice.”

The entrance hall of Rosier Manor is stark white, airy in a manufactured sort of way. Pearly hangings drift down from the ceiling over the tall bay windows, and the floor is pristine white marble. The high, high ceiling seems to

stretch miles above James. Andromeda's nails dig into his arm and the two of them step off the apparition point.

Andromeda's body is strange to exist in, stiffer than his own and with a straighter back and a higher chin. James can feel tautness in her jaw as he maneuvers it in circles.

Around them, a huge crowd is already gathering. There are hundreds of wizards and witches here, and their pale faces lurch in a hurricane around James. It feels like a curse or his own anxiety or maybe a mixture of both. Sunlight refracts through the crystal shards of the dangling chandeliers above. It's surprisingly contemporary in here. Like medicinal poison, rather than a draft of living death.

Andromeda herself -- the real one -- grabs his arm, circling it within her own. She's wearing the face of a muggle James doesn't recognise, tall and dark with similarly aristocratic features. She squeezes. He squeezes back.

"We should wait until the parlour is a little more full to step through," she says to him in a very low, very level voice. "We can get away with hiding in the middle rows for the ceremony. After that, I'll slip away."

"Okay," James agrees. Andromeda's higher, sharper voice coming out of his throat makes him stiffen. *Only a few hours and it'll be over.*

Across the hall, a glass smashes and laughter ripples through the crowd. Somebody has dropped their champagne flute on the cold floor. A faint rumbling as footsteps scatter. *Sirius could be under my feet right now.*

Andromeda squeezes his arm *hard*. "Focus."

“Right.” Even the way she moves is like Sirius. Sharp and restrained like a cut diamond. He would have squeezed James’ arm like that, hard and painful and brief.

They step out into the crowd together. It’s a good thing Andromeda’s playing the man, James muses, in this pit of sexist vipers, because she makes a very good leader in the couple, with her hard eyes and her sure stride. James sticks close to her side, but not too close, not enough to be considered indecent. Andromeda is as slight as him, at least, so the dress robes fit well. A little masculine in their cut, perhaps, but the real Andromeda doesn’t seem to mind.

Merlin, it’s white in here. Like a snowdrift or a muggle Tory march. All pale faces and blindingly silver decor. James struggles to keep his eyes off the floor.

Somebody snares James’ arm. He stiffens and, expertly, like she was born for diplomacy, Andromeda pulls him slightly behind her. “Yes?” she asks the stranger.

The man... James doesn’t recognise him, he doesn’t think. From an issue of the Prophet, perhaps, but not as anybody of much note. He’s staring hungrily at James.

“So good to see you at a function again, Andromeda,” he leers. “It really has been too long--”

Andromeda’s grip tightens. A snare around a hunted rabbit. “Apologies, I don’t recall the name?” she asks, the voice of her muggle proxy deep and commanding.

Finally, he draws his eyes from James’ (Andromeda’s, he supposes) face and turns to the real Andromeda. “Has our young mistress picked up a new suitor?” he asks her.

Andromeda sticks a hand out in front of her. Beringed and expensive-looking. James wonders if she has charms to make herself look like royalty even when masquerading as a muggle, or if it just comes naturally. "Wolfgang Lapointe."

"I don't recognise the name...?"

"My family were on the Accord a few years ago, sir," Andromeda says smoothly, an edge to it. Offense, perhaps, though it's feigned. "We've met before, Mr. Avery."

"Oh--" Avery stammers, caught off-guard. "Ah, yes, of course, Wolfgang. Fantastic to see you in such good health."

James has to keep from staring. Andromeda plays this thing like it's a game. Maybe she was right about Sirius after all.

"You too, Albertine," Andromeda says, smiling like a wolf. "I trust business at the Ministry is running smoothly? Affairs in France have been quite turbulent of late, I'm sure you're quite aware."

Avery laughs. Even his laugh is slimy. "Perhaps you'd do better under our wing, Wolfgang, with your talents for--" He seems to think fast. "Diplomacy. Yes, the Ministry is undergoing quite a few... overhauls. I'm sure young Mistress Black here has explained it to you plenty."

Andromeda's blunt nails dig into the inside of James' elbow.

"Yes," he says as sweetly as he can manage, and it comes out in Andromeda's voice. "As best I can, at least. You know politics has never been my strong suit."

Wrong thing to say. Andromeda's face falls subtly. Avery chortles, something about that evidently very funny.

"I can assure you," he scoffs, "Druella would disagree with you on that. Why, for all the trouble you've caused that family..." He smiles, halfway fond. There's something awfully plastic about it, like it's melted in the sun. "Well. Blood is blood I suppose. And what would family be if it wasn't for the falling outs?"

Andromeda and James laugh politely. Her nails must be drawing blood by now. "Indeed. If you'd excuse us, I think some champagne is in order," Andromeda says slickly, pulling James just slightly behind her. "Thank you ever so much for the catch-up, Albertine, I'll bear what you've told me about the ministry in mind..."

She's already tugging James away, and James follows without complaint, trying not to stumble over the hem of his robes. His face would be burning if he was in his own body, but evidently, Andromeda doesn't have human physiology -- she's built like a Black, and her face doesn't have the capability to blush, so he manages to stave it off.

They make it to a long, thin table to the side of the room, decked in white and silver. Andromeda offers James a champagne flute.

"Don't drink it," she says in a low voice. "Keep your arm in mine. Look me in the face and talk about something innocuous."

"Okay," James murmurs. "It really is beautiful in here. They've gone all out."

"Indeed. Quite lovely. I'd imagine most of it is bespoke. Too expensive a wedding to be spellwork. People would talk." Andromeda casts a glance around, over the top of James' head. James wonders how it must feel for her to look into

her own face and see it speaking back to her. "I can spot four relatives from here. They're watching us."

"These people hate you."

She stiffens, but only slightly. "Yes. They do. Very much."

"Are they going to try anything while you're gone?"

"So long as you keep out of the way and keep quiet, you should be just fine." Another squeeze, gentler now. "They're not going to try to pick a fight. That's not why they invited me. They're just trying to... well. Posture. They'd like it if I got married like this someday. This is to make an example of the bride and groom. So long as we don't make a scene, we'll make it out alive."

"Okay," James mutters. "And you're not going to get married like they want you to?"

Andromeda smiles faintly. "Sirius has already told you my heart is taken by another."

"He has," James admits lowly. "Tell Ted I said hi."

"Voice down," Andromeda warns, tone not wavering even for a second. "But yes. I will." Then, her face goes stony. "I'm going to start walking us towards the back window -- the big one with the ivy. You're going to keep looking at me and not behind you. Okay?"

"Okay," James says. His back prickles with a stare. He doesn't look over his shoulder.

They start strolling away, towards the back of the room. James echoes Andromeda's footsteps, falling into stride beside her.

"Look up at me," Andromeda murmurs. "Tell me about something. Quietly. Something. Anything."

"He had a bruise on the back of his neck," James stumbles out. "At the beginning of second year. Big and dark. I remember it like it was yesterday -- Remus and Peter, they're our roommates, had gone to sleep already, and he was getting changed on the bed across from me, and I thought it was a weird shadow at first. It was huge, went right down his back and around his shoulders and didn't go away for months."

"Mmhm," Andromeda hums absently, chin up, scanning the room. Her nails have started to dig in again, though. She doesn't seem angry with him this time. "I see."

"I tried to put bruise paste on it," James stutters. He keeps his eyes on her face. "At first, he wouldn't let me. He was always weird about stuff like that. Didn't like other people thinking he was hurt. I think he got worried I was... I don't know. I would think he was weak, or something. I didn't. I never did. I never would."

"Right." Andromeda raises her voice just a little. "That's quite fascinating, Andromeda." *Keep going.*

"The bruise paste didn't help," James says. "Obviously. I don't know much about Dark magic, but whatever it was that hurt him, it was more than my two galleon bruise paste could do anything about. Only I saw it. He wouldn't let the others know they were hurting him. I think we all knew, sort of, by then. You can sort of tell, you know? In the way he talked about that stuff. The things he said."

"Yes. Yes, indeed."

"I wish I'd done more to help him." James forces himself to keep looking at Andromeda. "It haunts me, you know? That I didn't do enough. That maybe if I'd done more, he would have come to me, not Dumbledore. That if I'd done more, he would have come to my house, rather than going home."

Andromeda's free hand comes up to squeeze his hand gently. "I can't speak to British politics," she says faintly, tiredly, something so exhausted in her voice that it's like it's killing her. "But I wouldn't blame you for it."

"Thanks," James murmurs.

They reach the window. It's quieter here, less packed. Whoever was stalking them must have given up, because Andromeda's shoulders have loosened slightly.

"Here." Her hand drifts over the top of James' champagne flute, a fluttering sort of motion. "Top-up. Quickly."

"Right." James takes a long, ungraceful swig. Andromeda doesn't complain.

She takes a drink from her own glass, Adam's apple bobbing. With the motion, she leans close to his ear. "I meant it. It's not your fault."

"It feels like it is," James whispers.

"That's survivor's guilt, and it lies," Andromeda says simply. Her eyes stray across the room, and James watches them catch on a light-haired woman near the entrance to the parlour. Narcissa. "But you survived, and he will, too."

"Right." James wants to ask, but he doesn't. It's not his pain to bear, even wearing her face.

The ceremony is long and, honestly, quite boring. James spends half of it staring out idly over the pale crowds, trying not to meet anybody's eyes, and the other half looking at Bellatrix Black. She's got Sirius' face, too, sharp and thin with dark eyes and his curly black hair. The same hint of madness as the rest of her family. Taut around the jaw like she would take a chunk out of you if you got too close. Eyes just a little too wide.

If the world keeps reminding him of Sirius, James is going to do something regrettable.

Andromeda keeps her wrist linked with his through the arduous affair. Halfway through, she slips him his next dose of polyjuice, and James drinks it as subtly as he can, covering the motion with a cough. He's not sure if it's his imagination or the eyes of the entire room really are on him.

When he looks back up, there's one person who isn't hiding their stare. Bellatrix. Her sharp eyes pin him to his chair. James stares back harder. Bellatrix doesn't break the contact, so eventually, James has to.

Dark bruise. Cellar. Chains. *Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.* It really is a pit of vipers in here.

As the guests file out of the parlour and into the huge dining hall for the afterparty, Andromeda tugs James to the bathrooms near the entrance hall. They shuffle together into a small alcove between the men's and women's rooms, just out of sight of the hallway, and dose up on polyjuice again.

In the dim light, Andromeda's dark eyes, still striking even in a stranger's face, are a little rabid. No less determined, though, so James figures that's worth something.

"I'm going to head downstairs," she murmurs, very close to his ear. "If anybody asks, the entree disagreed with me and I've had to step out. Remember: Wolfgang Lapointe. I'm French. They know me from the Accord. Okay?"

"Okay," James murmurs, but he grabs her wrist tight, suddenly out of his depth, struggling for breath like a drowning man. "Wait. Wait. I can't do this."

"Yes you can." Andromeda grabs either side of his face, hard. She stares him down. "If you're anything like him, you can."

I'm nothing like him, James wants to say. I'm nothing like him. I've never been anything like him. He's strong and he has a temper and he's a good liar and he's brave. So brave.

"Okay," he says, instead of saying any of that. "Okay, I'll try."

"I'll be back to get you as soon as I can be."

"Right."

She goes to step out. James pulls her back again. "Wait. One more thing."

Her nostrils flare. "Yes, James?"

James tries to put all the force he has into his stare and his voice. "Get him. Please. Please get him. I can't take anymore of this."

Andromeda's severe face breaks. "Okay," she murmurs. "You're a good kid." Something in that is almost like a goodbye.

Before James can reply -- before he can ask what that meant, before he can do anything -- she's pulled the cloak over her head and she's gone, slipping back out into the white light. After a few moments of standing in the dark, he follows her out into the crowd.

James spends the first fifteen minutes sitting alone in a window seat in the dining hall. Strangers mill around him, but sat down as he is, he's less visible over the crowd, less conspicuous. He keeps his back straight and his chin up, just like Andromeda, and stares out over the gardens out of the lacquered window. The sun is already tracking a course towards the horizon. In only a few more hours, it'll be nightfall.

It truly is beautiful in here. Softly pulsing orbs of golden light float around the ceiling of the room, and hovering basins of hanging ivy drift overhead, flowering at their roots, white and peach. The marble floor is untiled, one long, unblemished sheet of crystal that shimmers in the light, and the thin glass of the windows is so clear you wouldn't know it was there if you didn't see the pane. A long, mahogany dining table is stretched through the middle of the room, piled high with decadent foods. Even the smell of them is enough to make James nauseous.

When somebody drops down into the seat opposite him, he flinches hard, looking up. It's a man he doesn't know -- tall, ginger, with a long, gangly sort of frame.

"Andromeda!" the man exclaims delightedly. "I don't think I've seen you since graduation!"

"Hello!" James says, and hopes his shock sounds like delight. "It's so good to see you -- it's been so long!"

"And you, too." The man lowers his voice. "To be quite honest, I was shocked to get an invite, not now that it's common knowledge that Molly and I are engaged. Not exactly an approved marriage, is it? Though I suppose they're inviting most everyone they can get, with the exclusion of... well. Well, either way, she's..." He coughs into his hand. "She's been unwell for the past few days, I'm sure you understand."

"Right," James says. He's never seen this man in his life. "I hope she... feels better soon."

The ginger man shoots her a small grin. "She said to send you her best wishes. We really should organise some sort of reunion sometime."

"Right. Yeah, absolutely." *Yeah*. Andromeda would never say 'yeah'. "Yes, I mean."

The man doesn't seem to have noticed. "Between you and I," he says, leaning in, "I'm a little surprised to see you here, too, Andy. I was under the impression you and your family still weren't talking, after everything with Ted."

"Well," James says, thinking fast. "We aren't. Not really. To be quite honest, I think a few people are very unhappy to see me here. But I thought it important to come anyway."

"Of course. You know the bride, then?"

Shit. Shit. Shit. And James doesn't. He doesn't have a bloody clue. "Uh. Yes. We knew each other as children."

"I see." The man doesn't really look like he gets it. He looks so out of place here. Just like her. At least she's not alone. "Well, I've never met her. French, isn't she? The French chapter of the Yaxley family, that is."

"Right. Yes, of course."

"Yeah."

They stare at each other for a second. Then, the man makes to stand up. "Well, it really was great to catch up..."

Against his will, James snares the man's arm. He stares at James like he's grown a second head.

"Can I help you, Andromeda?" he asks.

"Stay?" James croaks. *Stupid. Stupid.* "For just a moment. Sorry--" He lets go.

"No, it's alright." The man sits back down slowly. "You're quite pale, Andy, should I... would you like some water?"

"I'm alright." James tries to compose himself. He's started to slump in his chair, a very un-Andromedaish thing to do. "I'm okay. Thank you, though. Just... a little nervous, I suppose."

"That's okay." The man reaches over to squeeze his arm. "I get nervous at things like this, too. Always feels like I don't belong. I suppose it must be even harder for you."

James nods faintly. "It's strange, being back here," he says. "I grew up in this house."

“Oh, really?”

“Only when I was very small.”

“Right.”

“My relationship with my family... it’s been quite odd.”

“Right.” There’s hesitation in the man’s voice this time. Eventually, as if he’s had to force himself, he asks, “Didn’t you have a relative disappear lately? Young Sirius Black. Molly’s brothers were telling me. It was quite the Gryffindor House scandal, I’ve heard.”

The joke falls flat between them, and its corpse sits in James’ lap. He sort of wants to throw up. “Yes,” he whispers.

The man leans in. “Is that why you’re here?”

A hand claps down on James’ shoulder. The man goes shooting backwards, back into his own seat. James keeps his head down, staring at the floor.

“Uh,” the man says. “Of course, erm, take my seat, if you’d like-- apologies--”

“Thank you,” a female voice says smoothly.

Then, James’ ally is gone.

His seat is taken by a woman in a sheer-armed dress, dark burgundy with lace detailing. James draws in a long, shallow breath, and then looks up.

Bellatrix Black is smiling across at her, sharp like a blizzard. “It’s been far too long, Andromeda, truly.”

Chapter End Notes

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MAGNETISM

Chapter Notes

this one is out so quick! im great at this fanfic author thing

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Erm,” James says. “Yes. Yes, Bellatrix. Hello.”

Bellatrix looks him up and down leisurely. “Didn’t see fit to dress for the occasion, I suppose,” she scoffs. “Or is that the most expensive thing you could afford? Quite sad, honestly. You’d think mother brought us up better than that.”

“I...” James scrambles for something to say. “They’re not that bad. I didn’t want to draw attention.” He lowers his voice. “I would rather not make a scene.”

“Oh, is that what this is about?” Bellatrix asks. She almost sounds delighted. *Bugger*. “Not making a scene? And here I was, thinking this would have all been a lovely affair with no *scenes* to be avoided if it wasn’t for you and your disregard, your contemptment. You know how mother cried when you left? Sobbed for days. I was sure the pain of it would kill her.”

“Bellatrix,” James says desperately, keeping his voice down as people start to turn and stare. “Bellatrix, please just let me get this over with and I’ll be gone. Okay?”

“You really thought you could turn up and everything would be okay?”

"I wanted to be here for... for the family. One last function together."

Bellatrix flares her nostrils just like Andromeda does. "You don't think I'm stupid, do you, Dromeda?"

James' heart leaps with anxiety. "No," he hurries out. "No, of course not, Bella. You're not stupid. I never said that."

"Then don't think I don't know why you're here."

His gut plummets like a stone into a lake. "Bellatrix..."

Bellatrix leans in close, eyes glinting. Her hand strikes out to gesture through the crowd. "You think I don't see you all? Ten or twenty of you here. Albus' childish little Order."

"Uh..."

"If you think any of you can put a stop to this," Bellatrix whispers, more like a hiss, "You're dead wrong."

"I... I don't know what you're talking about, Bellatrix..."

"Oh yes you do," Bellatrix says. She's so close now that James can feel hot spit and scorching breath burn against his face. She might as well be a dragon for the acid she's spitting. "You wouldn't have come if you weren't coerced. You forget that if anybody knows you, Dromeda, it's me. I know you inside and out. I know that if you hadn't been asked, you wouldn't have come. Somebody wanted you here."

"No-!"

"And I'm willing to bet--" Bellatrix is almost in the seat with him at this point. She smells like Sirius -- like expensive

parchment and woodfire, like magic. Wild magic. Something deadly to it. "I'm willing to bet, Andromeda, that it was the old man. Well, I'll tell you now, I would run now if I was you."

James swallows hard around the lump of fear that has gathered in his throat. For a moment, he doesn't know what to say. "Bellatrix, I don't know what you're talking about," he says weakly. "Truly. I don't."

"Play dumb all you like, sister." Sharp smile. "It's your funeral."

"Bellatrix--"

But Bellatrix Black is already whipping to her feet. In her dark dress, she's a knife in a hurricane. James looks up at her and he knows, then, how it must have felt to be the people she tortured. How it must have hurt. The glory in her eyes, how it must have sparked like a bushfire.

"It was good to catch up," Bellatrix says. Her smile slips for a moment, just a moment, and she looks so furiously angry that she's barely human. Her gaunt features settle into misery like they were born into it, like that's what they were raised for. "If you're ready to die, then die."

She strides off into the crowd, back towards the head table, where the bridesmaids and men and families of the couple are gathered. James is left alone, by the dying light through the window, heart pounding so hard it almost hurts. He can feel eyes burning into him from all directions.

He takes a long moment to compose himself, even though a part of him really, really wants to cry, or yell, or something. *Come on, Potter. Pull yourself together.*

Then, he stands up and shuffles into the crowd, towards the central table, scanning the room. Order. Something about an Order. Dumbledore's people are here. Surely, they must be here for a *reason*.

If Dumbledore is here, then James hasn't seen him yet. Maybe he's late, or maybe he's disguised, or maybe he's not coming at all. James scans the crowd for him, picking through the pale faces for his tall, colourful visage. Nothing jumps out, and it's hard to miss Professor Dumbledore in a room full of people. Very, very hard.

Across the room, a man catches James' eye. Tall and dark, one of the only people here who doesn't look like he's come from European aristocracy. He smiles slightly and all at once James recognises him. Kingsley Shacklebolt. A graduate as of last year. Pureblood, but not one of the crazies.

Dumbledore's people.

James makes a bee-line for him. He stays where he is, watching James come closer.

"Alright," James greets when he gets to him, then curses himself. "Sorry. Shacklebolt, isn't it? It's good to see you again."

"Andromeda Black?"

"That's me." James smiles faintly, sinking down to lean against the wall beside Shacklebolt. It feels sort of safe to stand near him. Andromeda might be older than the man, wiser and sharper, but James still feels all his sixteen years.

Neither of them says anything for the first while. Shacklebolt twirls his wand between his fingers like a

muggle drummer, around and over the back of his hand, deft and clean.

“Suppose Bellatrix and the rest of their clan aren’t too happy with you?” he asks, after some time.

James shakes his head. “You could say that. She’s not very subtle.”

“I think half of wizarding Britain just saw her threaten you,” Shacklebolt laughs. “Between you and I, she seems quite stressed, don’t you think?”

James scans the room for her, finds her watching him and looks away. “You could say that. My, uh, business... it’s bad for them. All of them.”

Shacklebolt shrugs. “You know me. I’ve no opinion.”

I don’t know you, James wants to say. *Help me*. Instead, he clears his throat. “She... she mentioned that something’s coming. Something to do with the headmaster.”

Shacklebolt’s face doesn’t even twitch. “She might be right.”

“Is that why you’re here?”

He smiles indulgently at James. “Why, of course not. I am a pureblood, after all.”

“I know that. You know what I mean.”

Still, he doesn’t falter. He leans in towards James. “I can’t tell you much. I would seriously advise you to get out of here, and soon.”

“Why?”

“Because we don’t have long before things get ugly, I suspect.”

James folds his arms, hugging his stomach. “Merlin, I didn’t sign up for this.”

Shacklebolt casts him a quick look. “None of us sign up for how we’re born,” he says simply. “The floos are still open, but not for long. Run while you can.” He hesitates. “I don’t know what you intended to fix by coming here, Andromeda, but...”

He trails off.

“You can’t say anymore,” James says. “I know. I... I can’t go. I just can’t. But I know.”

“Right. Then take care of yourself.” Shacklebolt smiles tersely. He pushes off the wall. “I’m sure we’ll catch up again soon, Miss Black. Stay safe out there.”

“You, too,” James says weakly, and watches Shacklebolt go.

Nearby, a witch James doesn’t know casts a sharp *timus* . James spies the conjured clock. 2:30PM already. The day is slipping away from him.

Across the room, the bride laughs at something, high and sort of screechy. There’s a thin sheen of sweat on her forehead. James wonders whether she feels as out-of-place as he does and then stows away that thought. Maybe it’s just that she’s aware of how bad this is about to get. That she knows her wedding is set to become a battleground.

The walls almost vibrate with tension. *Run while you can*, Shacklebolt had said.

James makes a stupid, stupid decision. He's been known to do that.

Slipping back through the crowds, he tries not to draw attention, eyes burning through him as he slides towards the exit of the main hall. The glowing golden orbs overhead seem to lurch as he makes his way back to the little alcove and squeezes inside. In the dark and quiet of that small, private space, he steadies himself, breathing deep and long, and then tops up on polyjuice again. Bloody awful taste, but he slams it down anyway, feels it pulse out through his body. *You're alive.* Dark bruise. Dark bruise.

Andromeda's going to kill him, but fuck that, it doesn't matter.

James creeps out of the alcove and looks left and right. The hallway bisecting the main hall and the parlour is high and narrow, lined with large windows. On one end, the bathrooms. On the other, a staircase leading up, up, up, wide and spiralling. A trail of ivy curls around the white banister.

James slips his wand up his sleeve and takes a deep breath. Then, he heads for the stairs.

Nobody stops him as he pads up the white marble steps, though they ring out tinny and soft with each footfall. Above, at the top of the stairs, a white diamond chandelier dangles, and it spins and spins like a dancer with each loop James takes. Up and up. He just has to keep his nerve and keep going.

When he gets to the top of the stairs, he's faced with another pristine white hallway, this one without the decor of the parlour and main hall. On one end, a heavy set of closed

double doors. On the other, a narrower, wooden set of steps-- down.

Down. The cellar. Bingo.

James hurries to the steps and descends into the dark. This staircase is narrower and less well-lit than the other was, but it descends further and further down, in tight, dizzying circles, one loop after another. The bottom is so far down that James can't see it. It feels almost as though he'll be descending forever.

When the stairs finally give out to cold, stone flooring, James is faced with a narrow door. The wood is aged, but the handle is brass and looks new, not limescaled with age.

James prods the knob with his wand. Nothing happens. Then, gingerly, he touches it with the tip of his finger.

Something cold sweeps through him, almost like foreboding. Then, nothing happens. No alarm. No floor-dropping trap.

Just quiet and stillness.

Spooked, James pushes the door open. It's not locked.

Inside, the cellar is nondescript. With a low, squat ceiling and hovering candles dotted through, there's no daylight. Old, empty wine cases, stood up against themselves like pyramids, line the outer wall. Directly in front of James, a stone wall and a row of black doors, each with silver locks.

"Fuck," James murmurs. "Hello?"

No reply. Just more pure, unbroken silence.

"Anybody there?" James takes a tentative step towards the doors and listens for rattling. "Sirius? Padfoot?"

Distantly, something drops, likely damp from the rotten wood of the ceiling. Still, it makes James jump.

"It's me!" James raises his voice to shout, realising he still sounds like Andromeda. "Pads, it's me! Prongs! Are you in here? Sirius!"

Still nothing. Just empty, vapid quiet.

James' ears pop. Silencing spell.

He whirls around. A figure in the doorway behind him lashes out their wrist. "Expelliarmus!"

James' wand goes spinning out of his grip and hits the wall with a crack. James yells out in alarm, staggering backwards, and the figure follows him out into the light.

Immediately, he knows who it is. The hem of her dress is torn and she's scowling fiercely, but her features are familiar in the way a recurring illness is familiar. Druella Black.

"It was foolish of you to come here," Druella says, advancing on him. "I was sure I had raised a daughter with enough sense to know when she isn't wanted."

"You invited me," James says, raising his chin and doing his best to look like Andromeda would look. "Mother, I just thought it best--"

Druella gestures around herself with a sharp hand. "You didn't come here for us. Don't pretend, Andromeda."

Jams squares his jaw. "He doesn't deserve this. And you know it."

Flared nostrils. "Who are you to judge the decisions of the Dark Lord? Foolish girl. Always were foolish. Bellatrix warned me about you. I should have believed her."

"If you tell me where he is--"

"Do you think you can blackmail me?!"

"No!" James shouts. "No, that's not what this is. I was just hoping you had a *heart*."

Druella snarls. She advances further and James backs up, up, up, until his spine is pressed against the wall with all the doors. It's cold, too cold.

"I would have thought you'd learned," she snaps, "That in this family, we do not make decisions based on the whims of our *hearts*. The muggle-lovers have softened you up. They've made you stupid."

"The only one who's done that is me."

"Then it's good to know we've ousted you from the family before you could do anything regrettable."

"I guess it is," James says. *How the fuck am I supposed to get out of here?*

The floor has a very slight slope to it, and his wand has come to rest against the west-facing wall. It's about ten feet from James. If he can just...

No. He has to wait for the right moment.

Something to distract her. Something. Anything.

"Did you ever love us?" James asks, on a whim.

That seems to startle Druella. "Excuse me?"

"I asked if you ever loved us," James repeats, trying to put some heat into it. "Any of us. I keep thinking about him, you know, mother? Sirius, I mean. They hurt him. Even when he was too small to do anything about it, they hurt him. I wonder sometimes if he'll ever recover from how he grew up. This whole house is rotten, this whole bloody clan. I despise us."

Druella laughs, vaguely unhinged. "You dare..."

"I dare!" James shouts. "I do! I can't live under this... all this anymore, I just can't. I'm tired of watching innocent people get hurt." He thinks of Remus, thinks of Lily. "You'll never be half of what the people you hate are. Not even a fraction of them."

Druella slashes her wand out through the air and James' robes rip along the ribs. Pain flower across his abdomen like a curse, bright and hot like fireworks. He reaches a hand up and it comes back bloody.

"Fuck," he grits out.

"Don't swear," Druella snaps. Ever the mother. If her sister is anything like her, James hates to think of what growing up under Walburga's thumb was like.

"Fuck!" James shouts again, louder. He's not quite sure what his tactic is anymore. Going into this blind feels stupid, but he's not got any other option. "You walk around like you can do whatever you want, Druella, but one of these days, one of the people you've hurt is going to fight back."

The blood pulsing through his fingers is hot and sticky. James slides down the wall just slightly. *Fuck*. Whatever the wordless curse was, it was nasty. It stings like it'll never stop hurting.

"Just as dramatic as you've always been," Druella sneers. "Look at you, fainting from a nick. I should have known you would be worth nothing to us. Nothing to the Dark Lord."

"Like I'd want to help him. Like I'd want to be *anything* for him."

"Foolish--"

"I'd rather be foolish than fuck up my kids' lives, send them into a war that'll kill them!"

"This is *not* a war!" Druella screams, the sound ripping out of her like velcro. "This is a conquest! This is us taking back what is rightfully ours--"

The door to James' left tears open and a figure comes barrelling out. They've got something large in their hands and they sprint at Druella.

"Expelliarmus!" she shouts. They must not have a wand, because they keep running at her, raising the weapon high over their head -- James catches a glimpse of long, dark hair, the whites of their eyes, and then the broken stool leg they're holding comes crashing down atop Druella Black's head and she crumples to the floor.

"Fuck you!" the stranger shouts. They bring the stool leg down on her head again, hard, and then they whip it back up and it sends a sticky line of blood streaking across the ceiling. "Fuck you, fuck you!"

"Sirius," James croaks.

Sirius drops the makeshift weapon and spins around. His blurry white face breaks. "Andromeda? Oh, Merlin, I'm glad to see you--"

He runs across the room to James' side, sailing down to his knees there and fluttering his hands over the wound in his side. James drinks him in -- he's taller, much taller, and skinnier too, almost concerningly skinny, all hard edges and a gaunt face. Very, very pale. Dark shadows under his dark eyes. A new scar towards the top of his forehead.

But he's *Sirius*. Actually here. Here and alive and real.

"Sirius--" And clumsily, James reaches up to brush the overgrown hair out of his eyes with his hand. "Sirius. You're here."

"Nasty curse she's used," Sirius says, not looking at him, pulling apart the tear in James' robes to peer at the gouge through his ribs. "It'll need dittany. Nevermind about that. They'll know I'm out. We need to go, we need to run, now--"

He's already pulling James to his feet. In a haze of bloodloss and grief and overwhelming relief, James holds himself up against the wall. He can't stop staring at Sirius. Drinking him in, every inch of his long, gangly figure.

Sirius catches him staring. "Got something on my face, Andy?" he jokes, though there's not much mirth there. "Come on, I meant it. This isn't the first time I've made it out of my cell, he always knows, I think he's alarmed it. Come on--"

"Sirius," James says again. He reaches out to clutch at Sirius' blood-stained sleeve. His friend is wearing torn-up

muggle pants and an undershirt with no overshirt to go with it. He's barefoot. "You're here."

"I'm here." Sirius grabs his shoulders. "Andromeda. Snap out of it. We gotta go."

He starts tugging James towards the exit again. James makes it about halfway before staggering into Sirius' back, head spinning with nausea, and the two of them go down together, scattering across the stone floor like broken class.

"Ah, bugger, my nose." Sirius rolls onto his back and then pulls himself back to his feet. "Shit, shit, shit-- can you not walk?"

"I can walk," James gasps. "Help me."

They get James to his feet together, Sirius slipping an arm under him, and hobble towards the staircase. Druella's face is a bloody pulp and the sight of it makes James gag a little.

Sirius stops, then. "Didn't know you to be squeamish, Andromeda," he says, and James knows then that he's catching on.

"I'm not Andromeda," James says.

Suddenly, a cacophony of noise. Upstairs, it's like a bomb has gone off. The rattling boom shudders its way downstairs and the floor shakes with it. Sirius stumbles face-first into the wall and James feels his knees give out. Dust rains from the ceiling and all the hovering candles go out.

James rolls onto his back, side burning. He half-crawls towards his wand, lying a few feet away, and reaches out for

it, but before he can close his hand around it, Sirius has swooped in and grabbed it.

Standing above him, Sirius stares at the wand for a long moment, then back at James. "Mahogany," he murmurs. His eyes blow wide. "James?"

"Hey," James murmurs. "Sirius. Pads."

Another explosion rings out from above. Across the cellar, a huge chunk of the wooden ceiling collapses, planks of wood and chunks of stone scattering across the floor. Sirius dives to the ground, half atop James, and they cling to each other, more panic than person, as chunks of plaster and rock rain down on them like holy fucking deliverance.

"You're crazy!" Sirius shouts into his ear. "Absolutely bloody insane!"

"I know!" James yells back. He worms his arms around Sirius' stomach and squeezes hard. Sirius' bony spine is jutting out through his robes like something has possessed it. But he's *here*. He's here. "Remus has been fretting about you, you twat!"

"Like you haven't either." And Sirius grins down at him, through the dust and rubble, and it's him, so purely him that it's hard to look for very long. Bright and a little feral and a little mad. Black through and through. "You've missed me."

"I have," James admits. He squeezes harder. "Your aunt can throw a bloody curse."

Sirius rolls off him. Dust is still shaking loose from the ceiling, and upstairs, screams ring out through the crowds, thundering footsteps swarming overhead. "I know," he says

grimly. "First time I've seen her in years. She shouldn't have..." And he wipes a hand over his tired face. "I'm sorry you got hurt."

"I'm fine." To make his point, James stands, then sways. "Come on. Come on. Have you seen Andromeda? Uh, the actual Andromeda."

"She's here too?" Sirius takes his place at James' side and they limp for the stairs as one.

"She's polyjuiced. Big tall bloke, dark hair. I came here as her date."

Sirius shakes his head. "Nah, nobody's been down here. There's a silent alarm on the outside of the cellar, so she probably tried to go another way. I've been working on that lock for months. When I heard yelling, I... well. I figured it was now or never."

"Mean with that chair leg, aren't you?"

"You should see what I can do with a lock pick," Sirius jokes, grimacing, all teeth and sweat. "Come on."

They start up the stairs together, taking them two at a time, though James is slow, dragging them down even as he takes the inside of the steps and Sirius the outside. Sirius tugs him onwards regardless. A part of James wants to tell him to go on without him. Another more powerful, louder part knows Sirius would never listen, and it's a little selfishness there, too, because god forbid he let Sirius out of his sight now.

They've made it halfway up the stairs when footsteps start thundering their way down. James aims his shaking wand up above them. "Expelliarmus!" he yells.

A clatter. A wand comes tumbling down the stairs towards them and Sirius picks it up, spinning it between his fingers. The footsteps still, and Sirius tears off up the stairs without James, around the corner and out of sight, and then his steps go silent.

James struggles up after him. Sirius is facing down Pierre Rosier.

The man doesn't have the Blacks' notorious good looks. He's got long, trembling jowls and a mousy sort of face like a rodent. Sharp, beady eyes pin James, then swivel back to Sirius.

"You know what he'll do to you," Pierre says simply. "Kill me if you want, boy, but you know you're making a mistake."

Sirius' white-knuckle grip tightens on his stolen wand. "Out of the way, Uncle," he warns. "Or I'll make you regret it."

Pierre doesn't move. His hungry eyes tear into Sirius' dust-stained face. "You know what's coming tonight. Somebody told you."

"Wasn't hard to figure out." Sirius squares his jaw. "Not after I scratched off the silencing runes in the cellar. You all talk too loud. That's the problem with bloody rich people. You think nobody's paying attention."

Pierre takes a step forwards and Sirius yanks James behind him, shielding him with his long, lanky body.

"Not another fucking step," Sirius warns, steel in his voice.

Pierre doesn't take heed of the advice. Rather, he takes another step.

Sirius' wand hand is shaking. "Uncle--"

"You won't kill me," Pierre says, and his voice is smiling. James peers over Sirius' shoulder and the man is grinning in a gloating sort of way. "You don't have the spine. You're all bark and no bite, just like your brother. You know he threatened me, too, the day I took him to Durmstrang? Stole my wand and told me he'd kill me, just like you, but he couldn't do it--"

Sirius' shoulders are so taut they might snap. "Don't you fucking dare."

"You're a coward just like he is--"

"Crucio!" Sirius snaps.

Pierre goes down screaming. James clamps his hand over his mouth, gripping the back of Sirius' shirt tight, balling the fabric between his fingers. He wants to tell him to stop but his lips won't form the words. The sound is inhuman. Pierre cries like an animal, heaving and whining and screechy.

Sirius ends the curse. Pierre flops down against the wooden steps, gasping, face sweaty and red in the dim light. All the blood vessels around his eyes have popped. It makes him look demonic.

"You forget," Sirius snarls, "I am not my brother. I am not my mother. I'm your worst fucking nightmare. And Dumbledore might die tonight, but I will *not* let this secret die with him."

James yanks on his shirt. "Pads..."

Sirius shakes him off. "Diffindo," he says waspishly, and James watches as Pierre's white shirt tears open, thickening with dark blood. "You're lucky to be alive," Sirius snaps. Then, to James. "Come on. We don't have much time."

James scrambles after him as Sirius starts up the stairs again. They leave Pierre Rosier groaning on the wooden step.

At the top of the stairs, the second floor hallway is deserted. The pure white ceiling has a long, dark crack down the middle. From downstairs, there's screaming and yelling and the sound of curses being thrown. The white diamond chandelier above the main staircase is trembling, pieces of crystal clicking and whining against one another.

Sirius grabs James' hand and squeezes it tight. "Can you apparate out?"

James shakes his head. "They've closed off apparition, for sure. The floos are shut, too."

"Fuck!" Sirius yells. "I knew it, damn it all--"

James spins him around to face him. "What's going on? Padfoot, what's--"

"This is a trap," Sirius says. "And... and he's here."

It feels like somebody's poured ice water down James' back. "You-know-who?" he asks.

Sirius nods. He presses his forehead to James' for a second, very firmly. "You should hide."

"I'm not going anywhere without you."

“Who else is here?”

“Just me and Andromeda.”

“Good. Thank god. Don’t want anybody getting hurt.” Sirius tries to pull away.

James doesn’t let him. “I told you I’m not leaving you. Whatever that guy meant, I don’t care--”

“Jamie,” Sirius says. It comes out almost like a whine, edged with panic. “Jamie, you don’t understand.”

“It’s been a year!”

“And it might have to be a year more!”

“I don’t care what it is you know, it doesn’t matter--”

Sirius grabs his face hard, grips it between both hands. “James. Listen to me. Do you trust me?”

It’s a tortuous sort of question. Of course James trusts him. He would trust him until the end of time. But he knows what this means. Still, he’s got to be honest. If there’s one time in his life he has to be honest, it’s now. “Yes.”

“Okay. Good. Then you have to do as I say.”

“Sirius--”

“Prongs.” Sirius’ voice breaks on the word. “Please. For once, listen to me, and do as I say.”

James shudders. “Okay,” he whispers.

“Okay.” Sirius draws in a long, deep breath. “The Order of the Phoenix are down there right now, fighting with a group

of Voldemort's lot. Death Eaters. Dumbledore's here, or if he isn't yet, he'll turn up soon. Tonight, Voldemort's going to kill him."

Something cold clutches around James' heart. "He's not strong enough. Nobody could beat Dumbledore in a duel--"

"You forget that Voldemort doesn't play fair." Sirius' jaw clenches. "He knows I told Dumbledore. Once Dumbledore's gone, it'll only be me that knows. So I have to get out of here. And you can't be seen with me, or he'll go after you, too."

"Pads--"

"Listen to me!" Sirius shouts, so loud and ragged that James shuts his mouth. "Listen. Just listen. I can't die knowing this secret won't ever get out. I can't let the bastard live, not if there's anything I can do about it, and he's not going to stop looking for me." A brief, awful flash of pain across his austere features. "Not as long as I live. Things are about to get really ugly. For you, too."

"I won't be going back to Hogwarts next term," James agrees grimly.

Another explosion rocks the floor. A piercing shriek rings out from below and then an ugly sound like someone being skewered through by something sharp. They squeeze closer together, breathing the same oxygen.

"I'll come with you," James offers, thinking on his feet. "We can go on the run together. Get out of the country. You don't have to tell me what it is, but I'll be there with you. I'll protect you."

Sirius shakes his head. "Too risky," he says. "I'm not letting anybody die for me."

"I'd be willing to."

"I'm not," Sirius snaps. "Willing to let you die, that is. So here's what's going to happen. You're gonna go down those stairs and find Andromeda. The real Andromeda. One of you's got the invisibility cloak, right?"

"Right," James nods. "Right, yeah. She does."

"Okay. Find her and get her out of here. You'll have to go by foot -- even once you get out into apparating territory. Just trust me. Take muggle public transport. Keep your head low. Okay?"

"Okay," James promises. "Okay, I trust you."

"I'm gonna go down the other way." Sirius squares his jaw. "I'll climb out the window from the owlery down the hall and get into the parlour through the back. Make sure he sees me before I get out of there. Make sure he knows I'm alone."

"He'll kill you--"

Sirius grins, all teeth and no happiness. "Nah, Jamie, he'll try to make a spectacle of me. And I'm not bloody doing that, so no, he won't be killing me tonight."

A burst of bright sparks shoots up the stairs beside them, from inside the main hall. Sirius and James both startle backwards.

"We don't have much time," Sirius says grimly. He grabs James again, wrapping him in a fierce hug. Their skulls

knock together hard. "I'll see you again. Okay?"

"Wait--" James starts saying, fingers curling into the back of Sirius' shirt. "Sirius--"

"Trust me!" Sirius says, shoving him away and towards the stairs.

"Wait!" James snaps. "One fucking second, Merlin. Just let me--"

He fishes around in his pocket and pulls out the mirror, hands it to Sirius.

"I figured they'd broken your other one," he says. "Here."

Sirius stares at it, then back at James. "It won't work if it's only one," he says weakly.

"I know." James wraps Sirius' fingers around it tight, squeezing his pale knuckles. "But it helped me to have it all this time, it'll help you, too. Don't fucking die."

Sirius nods grimly. He shoves the mirror into his pocket. "Go!" he shouts.

James runs for the stairs. He's just reached the banister when Sirius lunges out and snares his wand from his hand.

"What--?" James whirls around.

Holding both Pierre's and James' wand in his hands, Sirius narrows his eyes, brow going tight. Then, he snaps both over his knee.

James' blood runs cold. He shouts something that doesn't have much diction to it. *No*, maybe, or *what*.

Sirius' pale face turns up towards him and he nods sharply. "Trust me!" he yells, and then pelts off towards the owlery, leaving James alone, wandless.

James watches his lithe, dark form vanish down the hall. Loss rings heavy and loud in his chest, and then all at once, Sirius is gone from his life again. Like a storm passing through -- there one minute, and gone the next.

Then, because he would follow Sirius anywhere, because he would do anything for him, he turns and pelts down the stairs.

The ivy along the banisters lashes out, tendrils trying to wrap around his ankles and calves. James rips through it, half-tumbling down the marble and into the chaos. The hallway between the parlour and the main hall is smoky, dust hanging low on the air, so thick that it's hard not to cough. James staggers off the steps and into the chaos curled over himself like a beggar, bent double and clutching his bleeding ribs.

Strange distorted figures and odd faces flash by. The hovering golden orbs have shifted, flickering dark red and black, their light strange and unearthly as they circle overhead, casting odd shadows through the murky air. James finds a wall and clings to it, fumbling his way through the dark. A stranger shoves past him and a bright purple curse streaks out of the darkness at them. They go screaming to the ground. James steps over their body.

"Aguamenti!" somebody is screaming nearby. "Aguamenti, agu-" They cut off into an ear-splitting shriek.

James runs towards their voice. It's a woman he doesn't recognise, writhing on the white marble with black flames licking along her back, rotting her skin, a putrid, awful

smell leeching from her into the air along with the smoke. The water does nothing. Before James' eyes, she curls and lashes and distends like a snake, yawping.

"No!" James hears himself shout. He lunges towards her -- to do what, he doesn't know -- but somebody catches him around the waist and pulls him away.

"Run!" they shout into his face. James' blurry vision clears and it's Shacklebolt, blood pouring from a slash across his forehead. "Black, run!"

James tears himself out of the man's grip and stumbles away from the burning woman. Lights spin around him, lurching like stars. Streaking curses and pieces of broken chandelier and more strange, black fire. A stunner scuffs his shoulder and he stumbles but doesn't fall.

Blind and coughing, James finds his way to the entrance of the main hall. The floating basins of vines have come alive in there, tendrils lashing out, whipping at the guests below. James watches one set of ivy vines hoist a man into the air, screaming, and snap his neck. Dark, masked figures cut through the writhing masses, standing up on the tables and in the windows, wands raised, firing off curses into the chaos, not seeming to care who they hit.

There are other figures fighting in there, though -- James catches a glimpse of a man he thinks he recognises, Alastor Moody, striding through the crowd, deftly firing off hexes, slashing at the strangling ivy. Frank Longbottom, James thinks he sees briefly, and a glimpse of a woman who, from the back, might be Professor McGonagall, though he can't really tell.

James knows one thing for sure -- he can't go in there.

Turning, he lunges for the entrance to the parlour, which is just as full and just as panicked, a throng of hysterical guests pushing towards the exit in a mass. Something is blocking them, though, the heavy double doors locked, and they're trampling one another.

James is about to take a step into the parlour to find a window, maybe -- something, anything -- when a hand grasps around his arm and he's face to face with, for all the chances, Orion Black, scowling down at him.

"I should have known you would try to cause trouble," he hisses. "We found your little doppelganger."

James can't stop the shout that rips out of him. Behind Orion, suspended on the air with her hair floating around her like a halo, is the real Andromeda. The polyjuice has obviously worn off, and her eyes are blown wide, blood on her face, which is twisted with agony. Smoke curls in tendrils around her like she's about to catch fire.

"Let her go!" he shouts. "Andromeda--"

Orion manhandles him back against the wall, an amazing, terrible strength to his movements, a hand worming into James' robes and fishing out the last of his polyjuice. James scrabbles at his large hands but it's too late -- he watches as Orion crushes the little bottle in his fist, potion dripping down between his fingers.

"Let's see who you really are," Orion growls into James' ear.

James thinks fast. Bringing a knee up, he hurls himself at Orion, crushing his leg into the larger man's stomach. Orion lets out a sharp grunt and James tussles with him for a few

moments before Orion gets the upper hand, hurling James to the ground.

James' head hits the marble. He sees stars, sees whole galaxies. The world does a long, slow ballroom dance above him.

Orion reaches for him, maybe to snap his neck. Some part of James imagines he's Sirius for a moment -- Sirius, younger than he is now, watching his father grab for him, with hands meant to hurt.

James' leg lashes out and trips the man. Orion tumbles forward on top of him and his hands find their way around James' throat, shoes squealing against the floor. James grapples with the hands and then bucks his shoulders upwards and tips them both over.

They crash down against the cold floor, both of them. There's an awful crack as something in James' shoulder comes loose.

Orion lets out a terrible shout. James looks up and the man's back has landed in a spreading patch of that awful black fire. His hand on James' throat loosens and James scrambles to his feet, panting, bleeding from the back of the head, heaving in breath after raspy breath. On the ground, Orion writhes, howling like an animal, like something inhuman, as the black fire licks up and around his broad torso.

"That was for Sirius," James says, and spits on the man. Orion's already senseless, death sweeping in. It still feels good.

A few feet away, Andromeda drops to the floor, heaving and gasping. Her shoulders trembling, she gets her legs under

herself and coughs, hard, like there's blood in her throat.

James rushes to her. "Andromeda--"

"I'm fine!" she snaps. "I'm okay. I'm okay." Her head lashes up. "James."

"I got him," James says. "He's out. I got him out."

Her face breaks. "I tried to get in through the back," she says. "Orion was patrolling. He was expecting me."

"Are you okay?"

"Nothing I can't handle." She shakes out her trembling limbs. "It'll just ache for a while. You're bleeding."

James is bleeding, he realises in the back of his mind. His ribs have soaked his robes dark, and the wound on the back of his head is weeping. There's something awfully wrong about his shoulder, too.

"Huh," he says. "I am."

"Let me." Andromeda shuffles closer and waves her wand. Bandages whip out from the end and curl around James' torso, over the top of his robes. "They won't hold for long, and if it was a Dark curse, you'll need dittany and sutures, but... for now." Another wave and a shorter lashing of gauze ties itself neatly around James' head, half buried in his hair.

"Thanks," James murmurs, trying to shake some clarity back into his head.

Suddenly, a masked man lunges from the smoke behind Andromeda at her. She screams, and it's only her quick reflexes that save her as she dives out of the way. James

kicks the man hard in the face and his mask cracks down the middle -- another kick and the white-silver shards of it lodge themselves in the man's pale skin, and he howls, staggering off to the left and straight into a wall.

"Shit!" Andromeda yells.

"I know!" James shouts back. "Come on. He told me not to apparate, we need to run--"

They haul each other up, and, half leaning on one another, they make for the parlour, which is already more full than before, clustered with clamouring people. James drags them through the crowd to a window and tries to smash it with his elbow. The thin glass barely tremors.

"Don't bother," Andromeda says. "It's magically reinforced." She raises her wand to it, then drops it, a look of understanding leaping onto her face. Turning to James, she says, "He asked us not to apparate, you said?"

James nods. "Yeah, that's what he said."

"He took your wand, didn't he?"

Confused, James nods again. "He didn't tell me why, though."

"Shit," Andromeda says. "Shit. That's not good."

"What's--"

Suddenly, there's a cacophony of noise. The crowd in the middle of the room splits down the middle, shrieking and running, stepping on one another to get away from a spot in the centre. James is suddenly filled with a sense of awful foreboding.

The air seems to shatter. More screams. The windows all shudder, shaking with unseen vibrations. The hovering lights go dimmer, that strange dark light twisting through the smoke and the dust. Andromeda's grip on him tightens. He hears her cursing up a storm under her breath.

Somebody grabs James' arm. "He's here, you have to run--" they shout.

James looks up. It's Gideon Prewett. A Gryffindor. He graduated last year.

Gideon's face twists. "James?!" he asks, and James realises with horror that the polyjuice has worn off.

The glass all across the ceiling, shaped into a wire-laced dome like the top of a birdcage, shatters. Shards of it rain down, white-hot and burning scorches into the ground. Gideon and Andromeda drag James back towards the main hall, but the doors out slam shut right before them.

"Fuck!" Andromeda screams, pounding a fist against the wood.

James crushes himself back against the wall, hyperventilating just a little. A dark mass is forming in the centre of the room, twisting like black sand.

All at once, it materialises.

The man standing in the centre of the room doesn't look human. He's got grey, almost greenish skin and reptilian eyes, yellow and black and slitted in the middle. He's tall, very tall, with dark, flowing robes that trail across the bloody marble, and a long-fingered hand closed around a slender wand. His flat, snake-like face surveys the room, eyes darting.

The whole world seems to hold its breath. James knows in that moment that if this man wants Sirius, Sirius is going to be running for as long as he lives.

Voldenmort raises his wand and whips it in a circle above his head. Stillness for a fragment of a moment. Then, the shards of glass twist into a tornado above him, hot like a summer storm, the friction of them heating the air up, and they lash outwards, spinning off in different directions.

James dives to the floor. In front of him, a man he doesn't know collapses, gargling, a shard lodged in the outside of his throat. Nearby, a young boy falls to the ground, glass protruding from his eyes.

All of a sudden, the room smells of blood, that awful, coppery smell like the morning after full moons. Screams and groans and shouts of pain. Andromeda's hand finds James' arm and when he looks at her, she's got a huge chunk of hot glass melting red-hot into her shoulder. Eyes stark with pain, she seems to plead with him in that glance.

Then, her eyes roll back in her head.

Gideon drags James back before he can grab at her. "There's nothing you can do," he hisses in James' ear, practically hauling James into his lap, boxed between his legs. "Stay down. Stay fucking down, Potter."

Eyes burning, James obliges, curling his arms over his head and trying not to pass out himself. *She can't be dead. She can't be dead.*

Blood pools from her left side, thick and tacky. When the edge of the small pool reaches James' robes, he thinks he would rather have just not been a wizard at all. Anything over this. Anything other than this.

Gideon's wand-free hand rubs his back hard, like you rub a baby when it's going to throw up. The other hand clutches his stout chestnut wand, ready to lash out.

Something bright like fire swoops down through the broken ceiling. A bird, James thinks, though his blurry vision.

There's a sharp, blinding flash of light. Over the quiet crowd, but for the groaning and the grieving, warmth sweeps the air.

When the dark spots blink out of James' vision, Dumbledore is standing in the centre of the hall, ten or twenty feet from Voldemort, calm and composed like he's here for a cup of tea.

"Hello, Tom," Dumbledore says. It's almost gentle. "You've made quite a scene, I see."

Relief courses through James' body. He slumps back against Gideon. *Thank god. Thank Merlin. Thank anybody listening.*

Voldemort doesn't take the bait. He doesn't even scowl. He just raises his wand and lashes.

Dumbledore parries, on the defensive, though he's calm, still. Voldemort lashes out his wand and three dark snakes, composed of that odd black fire, lunge at Dumbledore, teeth flashing in the strange light. Dumbledore dissolves them with a flick of his wrist and already, Voldemort is there with another curse, the floor around Dumbledore's feet erupting upwards like a tall, lashing wave. Dumbledore tames the wave, conjuring a boat of stone, and twiddles his wand in an odd motion that shatters all the windows, sending glass cascading down, which dissolves into soft sand before it can hit them all.

"I believe our fight should just be between us, Tom," Dumbledore says, still in that calm voice. "You should have known you could simply come to my office, you know. I would have met you there, too."

Voldemort sets the stone boat burning, glowing red-black like an ember, and Dumbledore extinguishes the flames along the hem of his robe with a twist -- he spins, and when he's facing Voldemort again, Dumbledore's beard has distended into a silvery vine, knotting around Voldemort's robes. Voldemort slashes and hacks at the thing and it solidifies into pure metal, which Voldemort shatters into pieces and sends spinning around Dumbledore in a bright, dizzying vortex.

Already, people are piling out of the windows and into the grounds. Gideon shoves James at one of the windows. "Go! James go!"

Dazed, still staring at the fight, James stumbles towards the escape. Hand on the pane, he carries on watching, not wanting to miss a second. *Come on. Come on.*

And Dumbledore gets a lucky hit. He lashes out at Voldemort, some strange, rope-like entity extending from the end of his wand and curling around Voldemort's throat. The Dark Lord tears at it fiercely, whipping his wand into a circle and casting the rope into a thick gas, but Dumbledore is quicker, the ground rippling out from under Voldemort and sending him to his knees.

"Ready to give up?" Dumbledore asks calmly. "There's no shame in giving up, you know. We could have a long talk about it, if you'd like."

Voldemort screams, long and primal. It's hard to believe he was human once. "You die tonight, Albus!" he hurls at the

headmaster, and then the hovering orbs of red light swirl into a frenzy around him, blurring into neon strips with their speed before hurting at Dumbledore, who manages to dispel all but one. The stray grazes his cheek, blistering it, the pale, papery flesh boiling at the touch.

“No!” Gideon shouts from nearby.

Across the room, at another of the broken bay windows, something catches James’ eye. Some *one*, clambering in through the window, not out.

Sirius doesn’t meet his gaze as he crouches low to the ground, shuffling through the crowd, unnoticed. His undershirt is torn, blood seeping from a gash along the top of his shoulder. *Leave!* James wants to shout. *Run! Go!*

He says nothing. He made a promise, after all.

Andromeda’s body is the price they’ve had to pay. Nearby, her sightless eyes bore into the ceiling.

Sirius makes it to the west corner of the room, near a pile of bodies. For a split second, his eyes dart towards James, flitting over him. Then, he looks away.

In the centre of the room, Dumbledore and Voldemort have gotten closer together, locked in a tight, tense battle of lashing spells and sharp shouts. Dumbledore attacks -- Voldemort parries, sends two back. Most of the time, Dumbledore manages to block. Sometimes, he doesn’t.

It’s when Voldemort is sending off a particularly nasty spell when it happens. A burning strand of light, so hot it scorches the walls, lashes from the end of his wand, malformed and bubbling like magma. Dumbledore parries, ice lashing up around him in a spinning cocoon, bright and

reflective, and the magma makes contact and hisses like a serpent, fizzing and spitting and smoking. Sparks leap across the ground.

Sirius steps forward. Just one step. Voldemort's gaze snaps towards him and his yellowish eyes go dark with fury.

Dumbledore drags his gaze away from Voldemort. For a split second, he and Sirius stare at one another. A million things pass between them. Dumbledore looks almost apologetic. Like he's done something awful he can never repent for. Sirius' stony face doesn't change.

Then, movement.

Voldemort's hot, glowing whip curls up on itself, lashing up into a tightly-wound circle, and then it forms into a fist, a grasping hand, clawed fingers--

Dumbledore's shield is a moment too slow. With his distraction, he fails to block it, and the huge, hot hand lunges around him and his legs crumple from under him.

James might scream. He isn't sure. Multiple things happen at once.

Sirius lunges for the window, scrambling to run. His work is done, now that he's been seen. James darts forwards -- to do what, he's not sure -- and steps hard down on a piece of broken glass, which skewers all the way up through his foot. Dumbledore collapses. The hot, glowing thing dissipates into scorching black steam. Voldemort howls with some unholy mixture of fury and victory.

Dumbledore's wand rolls across the floor. In the sudden, deafening silence, the sound of wood against wood is the loudest thing on the planet.

Voldemort picks up the wand, twisting it between his fingers. Then, he raises it, looking down at Dumbledore.

The old man's face -- James doesn't think he'll ever forget it. Melted. Flesh melded between teeth, bloody gums grafted into his cheeks. Flesh sunken into his cheekbones. One eye out of place, swivelling like it's not meant to be there. The room seems to hold its breath. Somewhere, somebody throws up loudly.

Somehow, even then, Professor Dumbledore manages to look forgiving. Like he's got some mercy left in his scorched body.

Perhaps that's what makes him do it.

"Avada Kedavra," Voldemort says coolly.

Out of the window, James thinks he catches Sirius' dark form streaking across the gardens, legs flying out beneath him, bare feet splashing through the wet grass. Free.

There's a bright flash of green light, and then nothing.

Pads,

Writing this on the back of a handkerchief I borrowed from an old lady on the bus. She said I look awful and I think I agree.

I'm on my way back. Muggle transport, like you said. I just watched Andromeda die. Professor dumbledore too.

My hands are shaking still. Sorry for my handwriting. I had to write to you. I had to. DON't know what I'm supposed to say. Guess I just had to say something.

You're gone. I saw you and you're gone. You left.

I love you. Too much, maybe.

Prongs.

The walk back along the one-lane road to Remus' place is long and awful. James' robes are in tatters and at some point, he lost his shoes, so he's barefoot and bloody, and the night is getting cold, darkness sweeping in over the south coast of Wales by the time he spies Remus' house on the horizon.

Remus and Lily are sitting together on the porch, cross-legged on the dry bit of the wood that the dew hasn't touched. Lily's got her hair tied back into a bun on the back of her head. Remus looks very pale.

They don't see him at first. James is about twenty feet away when he raises his voice and shouts, "Remus?"

Remus bolts to his feet. "James?!"

"Wait, it could be--" Lily starts, but Remus tears off towards James before she can stop him. James blinks and the world goes slow and then Remus' arms are tight around him, gripping him like he'll disappear.

"Hi," James whispers into his shoulder.

Remus pulls back, hands gripping his shoulders. "You got hurt."

"Dumbledore's dead," James says. His voice cracks. "I watched it happen, Remus. He's dead."

The air goes cold. Lily, standing just behind Remus with her hand on her wand, startles. "What?" she breathes.

"Andromeda, too."

The lump in James' throat bursts and then he's crying, great, heaving sobs escaping him as Remus lowers him to the ground and he sits on the concrete.

Neither of them seems to know what to do. Lily crowds in on James' side, rubbing his back gently as Remus holds James' face against his shoulder. James grips onto the back of Remus' robes and squeezes hard. Tries to say, *don't leave yet. Don't go*, like that night in the dorm.

"It was bait," James manages to heave out. "Bait to draw Dumbledore out. And he duelled him, and he lost. Got all... all burned up. I saw it. I barely got out, had to run for... for ages. Andromeda... the glass... her shoulder..."

Remus shushes him. "You're okay. You're okay."

James shakes his head. He pulls back to look Remus in the eye. "He escaped," James says. "I got him out. Sirius. I saw him. I saw him, Remus."

Remus' face twists. Shock and then anger and then hope and then grief. "Where is he?!"

"He told me he had to go alone." James sniffs, wiping his stinging eyes with the heels of his hands. "Said V-Voldemort is going to hunt him, so he has to go alone, because it's too dangerous for us to go together. I offered, I did. Told him to come back here. Told him I'd go anywhere with him. He wouldn't let me."

Taut with agony, Remus' face changes. "But he's okay. James. He's okay. Right?"

"I think so." James clutches at his aching stomach and shakes like he'll never stop shaking. "I think so. He looks unwell. Scared, too. Like it's been hard. Really hard. But alive. Alive and kicking."

"Thank god," Remus says. After all that, after everything, he's still relieved. James feels like an awful person for feeling the same way.

Above, a hawk circles against the blue twilight. The sound of the sea rushing in and out, and the smell of Remus' neck, feel like the only things in the world that are still real.

"We have to find him," James says. "We have to."

Lily's hand on his back stills. "We're not going back to Hogwarts, are we?" she asks, voice shaking.

James shakes his head. "I don't think we are," he says, and rubs his nose on Remus' shoulder. He tilts his head to look at her. "I don't think we can."

"Okay." And she lets out a long, shaky breath. "Let's get you inside, okay?"

They usher James into the house. Inside, it's too bright and too warm. Lily goes about making soup. Remus' parents aren't home yet and he shuffles James into the shower, going through the motions with him, rubbing shampoo into James' blood-soaked hair and then rebandaging his head and redressing his wounds.

"I don't have dittany," Remus tells him lowly, as James sits on the counter with his feet in the sink, Remus dressing the

wound across his ribs. “But I can stitch it.”

“Okay,” James murmurs, and lets him.

“We could go down to Diagon--” And Remus cuts himself off. “I suppose not.”

“I don’t think so, no,” James agrees.

Remus’ stitches sting. James barely feels it.

He stumbles through food in a haze. Remus’ pyjamas are too soft against his skin, and the light in the kitchen is too bright, and the waves against the cliffs are too loud. Lily gives him a long, gentle hug before she turns in for the night. It’s an unspoken agreement that she’s going to be staying here for a while. James rests his head on her shoulder and breathes in the sweet smell of her hair.

Then, like they always do, James and Remus shuffle into bed together. This time, they face one another, inches apart but faces close on the pillow.

“I wish you didn’t have to get hurt,” Remus murmurs. “Wish none of you would ever get hurt again. That’s meant to be my job.”

James shakes his head. His bandages rub against the pillowcase. “Kiss me?” he asks.

Remus obliges. It doesn’t help.

Chapter End Notes

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ICELAND

Chapter Notes

tw for this chapter: some non-sexual-but-still-creepy minor/adult grooming, and discussion of the trauma resulting from this! please give this a miss if this is triggering to you + take care of yourself! additionally, discussion of xenophobia, immigration injustice and discrimination.

this one was fun as hell to write. we're actually getting into the REAL spicy stuff now !

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Dark against the flickering lake, Riddle stands like a flag against the storm, shoulder pushed back as if he's Icarus. The sky is sharp, iron grey, and the air is thick with the earthy smells of pine and rot. The man has this way of standing that, if you were to meet him without knowing him, would make you think he ruled the whole world, owned everything and every person. If you did know who he was, it might be a little less convincing, but maybe not.

Sitting on the rocks, Sirius watches him. He's freezing his arse off. Serbia -- this rural stretch of it, anyway -- feels so desolate that there probably aren't even ghosts out here. The quiet of this place is far too loud. Every shift and groan of the surrounding mountains casts long, groaning echoes down towards them, howling like ghosts. Across the greyish lagoon, long, black trees hang spectral over the water, their looming reflections stretching out against the reflection of the light sky.

Overhead, a bird of prey (a hawk, perhaps, but Sirius doesn't really know his Eastern European bird species, so he can't really be sure) soars low overtop the rocks. Riddle tilts his head up, sharp chin jutting towards the sky, and watches it. His dark hair has settled in thick tangles around his neck.

The amount of times Sirius has imagined throttling that pale throat. But he just keeps sitting. It's like a sort of mind control.

"Your birthday soon, isn't it?" Riddle calls back to him, after some time. The silence had started to stretch so long and loud that Sirius was close to asking why he'd been brought here at all.

Sirius coughs into his elbow. "Yeah. November, so, uh, a few months. I'll be fourteen."

Riddle peers over his shoulder at him. "Excited?"

"My dormmates and I usually have a party. They like stuff like that."

"Gryffindors."

Sirius wraps his arms tight around his stomach. He doesn't want to think about James and Peter and Remus right now. It feels like a betrayal. "Yeah. I guess."

Riddle nods. He goes back to staring serenely out over the water. One of his feet is planted slightly higher than the other, on a craggy jut of rock that sticks out over the lapping shore. It makes him look like a conqueror.

"It's good," Riddle says, after another long wait. Sirius is tired of many things, but if he had to choose one that ails

him most, it would be waiting.

“Good?”

“That you have such close friends. I hear how you talk about them.” This time, Riddle doesn’t turn around. Sirius gets the distinct impression that he’s still watching him, though. Perhaps out of the back of his head. “They’re loyal to you, as you are to them?”

“Yeah.” That one tastes like a lie. “Well. They’re kids.”

“I see.”

“I don’t think they... get it.” Sirius thinks about Remus. “Most of them, anyway. They’ve got simple families. Simple lives.”

“You talk like I did when I was younger.”

What, like a raving loon? Sirius almost asks. He bites his black tongue. He’s gotten sort of good at doing that. It concerns him deeply. James might notice.

“I do?” he asks, instead.

Riddle’s shoulders jump. It’s an approximation of a laugh. “Like you see further than your peers. Like you understand the world in a way that they don’t.”

“It’s not like that.”

“No need for modesty. You’re smart. Smart in a way most of them will never be.”

Sirius stares furiously down at the rocky ground beneath his feet and tries to figure out the right way to tiptoe through this conversation. “We’re all smart in different

ways. My best friend, he's... I've never met somebody that can do magic like him. Like it's something he's tamed and it obeys him." God, he misses James.

Riddle stills. "You've met me."

"Apart from you."

"That's what I thought." Riddle turns away from the lake and crosses back to Sirius, feet crunching on the rocks. Against the light sky, his face is dark, cursed by long, lingering shadows. "Maybe that's a difference between us worth exploring. I don't recall the names of my friends from Hogwarts. Not one of them. But you... you're rather good at getting people to fight for you, aren't you?"

And doesn't that feel like a knife in the chest. "I suppose I am," Sirius says dully, and thinks of James telling him to be careful on the platform, and Peter taking that hex for him last Spring that put him in the hospital wing, and Remus... Remus' everything.

Riddle crouches down in front of him. One of his white, spidery hands reaches into his white shirt and pulls out the locket. The sight of it makes Sirius want to flinch. He barely keeps himself steady and still.

It glimmers in the dull light, the stones set into its silver face blinking like tiny eyes. They stare at Sirius. Sirius stares back.

"You remember that night?" Riddle asks softly.

"How could I not?" Sirius whispers. "You sort of made it hard to forget, Tom."

Riddle's pale lips crack into a smile. "That's the first time you've willingly called me Tom, Sirius."

A taste like ash or bile fills Sirius' throat. "Sorry. Riddle."

"No. I like it. I've told you that."

Sirius bites his lip hard, hard enough that it hurts. Tries to let the pain drown him out and sweep him away. He'd give anything, he thinks, anything at all, to get away from here. To get out. To run.

"Yes," Riddle murmurs, scanning Sirius' face. "Yes, you're very good at making friends."

Across the lake, a few rocks come loose from the mountainside, cracking down across the stone, bounding across the shore and into the water. One of them skips twice, water spitting out from under it in broad, low circles, whipping out against the wind. The sound of the descent rattles around them both. The echoes echo.

Riddle stands up. His long, dark legs obscure the daylight, and he steps back and offers Sirius a hand up.

Sirius looks at it, then at Riddle. Locket hanging out of his shirt, black hair blustering, he looks just like he did the night of the ritual those weeks ago. It was less than a month ago. It feels like years.

His eyes have changed, though.

They were different right after, in the moment following the green flash of light, after the muggle man's body hit the ground. They're not dark brown anymore. Instead, they're yellowish. Slitted. They contract with each slow blink the man takes.

Riddle twitches his hand up. "Don't make me wait, Sirius."

Sirius grasps it and lets Riddle pull him to his feet, desperate to let go, thankful when he's able to. The skin Riddle touched burns like battery acid or wound-dressing alcohol.

They approach the shoreline together, Sirius in Riddle's shadow. He never likes to walk in front of the man, both because he knows Riddle likes taking the lead, and because he's remice to let the man out of his sight for even a moment, lest he get stabbed in the back.

It's hard to believe he only met Riddle this summer. Tom's got this strange ability to consume your waking thoughts, to fill even everyday tasks with a deep-set fear that never, ever goes away. Sirius doesn't know how he's going to survive the school year.

Riddle reaches the shore. Grey freshwater laps against the soles of his black shoes.

"You can't come to get me for stuff like this while I'm in school," Sirius bursts out, all in a rush.

Riddle doesn't react for a moment. Then, he rolls his head around to look at Sirius, slitted golden eyes stabbing through him. "You don't enjoy this?" he asks, edging on mocking.

Sirius chews his lip. "My friends will worry. They'll ask questions."

"And if you're a good enough liar, you'll get around them."

"I'm not. I'm not like you."

Riddle laughs, a throaty sort of sound. "So desperate to keep those friends you've made, are you? I might call you strategic."

"You might call me mad," Sirius contends.

"I might," Riddle agrees, teeth glinting.

"I'll go back to my parents' place over Christmas. You can collect me then. Just leave me alone over term time." Sirius isn't sure if he's gambling or begging. The difference isn't huge. "Please. Tom."

Riddle seems to like the precarious situation he's got Sirius in, because he takes a while to answer that. "You know," he says eventually, "If you were anybody else, I would make some comment about insubordination."

Heart pounding, Sirius swallows. "But you won't."

"But I won't."

Sirius shudders. "I'm not like you," he says again, before he can stop it from coming out.

Riddle kicks a stone into the lake and it sinks beneath the soft waves. Then, he looks down at Sirius. "You're very, very much like me," he says. Just like that, it's law.

Stomach sinking to the floor, Sirius looks away from those piercing yellow eyes. Looks to the looming black trees. Looks to the silver-grey steel mountains. Looks to the sky and far, far away.

"I don't want to be," he says weakly. "I don't want this."

"I'm not sure you're telling me the truth."

“I always do.”

Riddle raises a sharp eyebrow. “If there’s one thing about us that you’ll concede is the same, Sirius, I think it’s that neither of us is particularly well-versed in truthfulness.”

That burns.

“I’d go as far as to say,” Riddle says softly, “That for all that you’re good at making people think they’re your friends, they’re not, really, are they? You’ve the patience to trick people into invisible snares. I’ve the wit and the skill to lure them into bloodier bites.”

Tom turns around to Sirius, fully. The wind picks up and it threads through his black cloak and his dark hair, strands of it buffeting over his pale cheek. He’s not beautiful, not like a pureblood, not sharp and tailored like a skirt or a knife. There’s something striking about him, though. Striking like the last thing you’ll ever see. Striking like a lucid nightmare.

“You and I,” Tom says, and the dream folds blackened hands around his throat, “Are going to change the world.”

The nightmare twists into itself, eats its own tail like a snake. Siris wakes gasping and hacking, the back of his shirt thick and sticky with blood.

The whine of metal; howling wind whipping through narrow openings, screaming like ghosts; the high, tiny sound of dripping and low, wet sloshing. The hull of the steel fishing boat dips low against the waves, the ocean crashing like drums against the sides. Impact rattles through the sides

and sends every cage and wire in the belly of the beast trembling and screeching.

Sirius presses himself back against the wall. He's boxed between two wire crates, shoulders hunched to keep out the cold. He doesn't remember how he smuggled himself aboard very well. He's not sure where it's going, either.

The bleeding of his shoulder has slowed slightly, in the time he's been running. Hours, twelve of them at least. He doesn't remember how it happened -- a stray curse at the wedding. Nobody was aiming for him, he doesn't think, or if they did, he didn't notice, just ran and ran and ran until he was right in front of Riddle, and then ran more.

Dumbledore. Dead. The memory runs him over like a train and leaves all the little bits of him gorey and soft.

You're rather good at getting people to fight for you, aren't you? Riddle's soft voice says in the back of his mind, rattling and reverberating around in his skull like a tuning fork. It sets each and every nerve on edge.

Sirius curls his shaking arms over his head and tucks himself into a very small ball. A part of him would exchange this for the cellar, but it's a very small part of him, a very quiet part, drowned out by the howling of the wind and the crashing of the ocean, and the fierce new beating of Sirius' rebellious heart, the singing of his hard, wounded soul.

The boat pushes on through the Atlantic. Soon, the sun will rise.

Sirius doesn't try to sleep again.

Jamie,

Okay, I have a lot to say, so sit tight. Get popcorn. Whatever you need. Grab Remus too. And Pete.

I'm writing this letter, though I know it's too risky to actually owl it to you, because I want something I can get to you quickly. I'm going to fold it up and keep it with me and if we see each other, even if it's only for a second like last time, I can give it to you and you can start to understand. Because I feel like a bloody prick for how I acted at Rosier Manor, but in my defence, I've no other option, so. Yeah. Read this and I hope it helps. It's been less than a week, so. I'm sort of an unreliable narrator, because I'm still a bit of a mess, but. That's just how it's going to be.

I suppose I should start at the beginning. I can't say much, but I'll explain what I can.

I met Tom Riddle (that's you-know-who, to you) when I was thirteen.

We were all just home from second year, and it was two weeks into the summer hols, and he came over for dinner to Grimmauld. He looked different to how he does now -- more like a person and less like a lizard -- and he was polite to my parents, in a diplomatic sort of way like world leaders are to each other when they meet at conferences and the like. He was smooth-talking and very smiley, and when they spewed their usual rot about blood purity and the like, he agreed with every word they said, in that eloquent way that smart bigots do when they want to affirm stupid ones.

I didn't think much of him for the whole dinner, honestly. You remember what you said to me when we got off the train that summer? You told me to stay safe, or you might

just have to come rescue me. I think by then you knew something was very bloody wrong at my house, though I don't think you fully understood it. With how much time you spent in the first months of that year trying to hold the little bits of me together, I think you knew enough. God knows I tried to keep the truth from you, but you're smart. Not as smart as me, but you're plenty smart. Maybe more now. I don't know. I know it's only been a year, but it feels like it's been decades.

Anyway. I'm getting off topic. I've got a whole big pad of this cool muggle paper (it's yellow! I didn't know they made paper in colours!) and I nicked a pack of those black ink biro pens that Remus likes, though, so I've got the space to get off topic, I guess. I've got all the space in the world.

So anyway.

I was being careful that summer, so I bit my tongue and didn't start a fight at the dinner table that night. Riddle must've seen something special in me, though, or maybe he just thought I was soft enough to buy into his bull, because the next day, he owled my parents that he wanted me to come to France with him on a business trip, to some pureblood settlement on the south coast. It would be two weeks, he said, and amazing for helping me make connections. I almost owled you to come get me. You would have done it. I know you would have. But Reg cornered me, and he begged me to go, mostly so the house would be less of a warzone, I think, and... honestly, it was a whole load of things. Remus and I had had this big argument we didn't tell you guys about, and my father was getting sicker and sicker by the day, the old bastard, and I had a lot of shit on my mind, so I said yes. If I have one single regret in my life, it was that, but I did it.

A week later, I owed you that I was going on holiday with my family and he came to pick me up, and we apparated to France.

If there's one thing I can tell you about the man, he's stupid rich. It'll be all the pureblood donors, I expect, but we were well accommodated for. I had a room of my own the whole time, in some wizarding boarding house that checked your blood status at the door -- bloody awful place, it was, stuffy as anything -- and I ate well, all this fancy European mainland shit, and he made good conversation, Riddle did, and it was more awkward than anything else.

He was there to make connections with some of the French blood nobility. I speak French. Did I ever mention that to you? I don't think so. I don't like that I speak it. Horrible romance language with horrible spitty saliva-y sounds. I only learned it because they wanted me to, as a kid. He spoke French too, better than I did. Fancy and correct and shit. So he did most of the talking and I sat and watched, and at the end of every night, we would map out the progress he'd made that day, talking to men who would invest in him and women who would lust after his titles and his power (once he obtained them, that was. At that point, he had only barely gotten the Dementors' allegiance, had only been marking people for half a dozen years, so it was rocky).

He was calm. Calm and human. Awful, truly awful, and I make no excuses for that, but he talked and acted and thought like a person, even if he was a terrible one. He looked a little like me, enough that people thought us brothers. Dark hair and dark eyes.

You see what I'm getting at, don't you? Something about the man changed.

After that outing, I went back home. He said he'd owl me and then he didn't, which I thanked every god in the fucking world for. It was a little like a poison. I couldn't think about the guy for weeks after without feeling sort of nauseous. I think you might have noticed that I'd changed when we got back for fourth year. You didn't say anything, though. I'm grateful for that.

The summer wasn't over yet, though. I'm overshooting. It was early August, and he wrote to my parents again, asked for me one last time. Again, I wrote out this whole big letter to send to you, and again, Reg begged me to just go, and again, I did it. I think I was scared that if they weren't hurting me, they'd hurt him. I can't let that happen, Jamie, I can't.

End of this double sided page. Will pick this up again soon. My hands are fucking shaking and it's getting dark out, and I'm too paranoid to put a light on in here (I'm in a cave, that's all I'm saying about my location, even though you should burn this once you're done with it), so this next bit was short but I'm gonna take a break for tonight. I'm tired of nightmares.

Love you.

- Sirius Orion Black.

There are two important things: Atlas is, in fact, doomed to forever carry his weight alone, and god above, is the weight of the world an awful thing to bear.

Sirius spends the first week holed up in a cavern near the long ice flats in Iceland. It's cold, too cold for Sirius the boy, but it's nothing to Padfoot the dog, and thank god animagus transformations don't set off the Trace, or he'd be six feet

under already, and there's simply no time for that. He lives on rats mostly, a rabbit one time that he gets very lucky, and on the sixth day of hiding, he sneaks off into a nearby town in dog form and begs for scraps until a harried looking butcher throws a raw sausage at him.

Iceland is nice. With no magic, it was one hell of a job smuggling himself onto a fishing ship to get up here. The first night was all blood and anguish, stuffed into the storage of the metal beast as it rocked on the turbulent Atlantic. Every time Sirius closed his eyes all he could see was the look on Dumbledore's face as he looked at him. That hasn't really worn off yet.

He thinks he'll stay for a while. 'Til that stops, at least.

On the seventh night, he manages to clean himself up a little in a public bathroom on the high street of the small Icelandic town nearby. Grindavik, it's called, and it sounds close enough to *Grindelwald* that it always makes Sirius flinch.

When he's sufficiently brushed up, no longer stinking like rot and blood, he shuffles into a muggle cafe and sits in front of a black coffee with his muggle pad of yellow paper, and starts making lists.

Trace-Triggering Magic:

- *Apparition*
- Floo (?)
- Any verbal incantations, wandless or not

- (Wordless spells? Find out more)
- Portkey use

Safe (?) Magic:

- *Permanent transfigurations (animagus transformation)*
- Pre-charmed magical objects
- Potionmaking?
- Magical healing (applied)

What I've Got Right Now:

- *£53.40 in muggle cash, and a few Euros (~15)*
- One shirt, trousers, stolen boots
- Pad and pens to write to James
- Shock blanket from the muggle lady in England
- James' mirror
- Two broken wands
- Start of a letter to James

‘The secret that could make or break the world’, he almost adds on the end, and thinks better of it. Secrets are fragile things. It doesn’t take much to break them. For now, he’s keeping it close to his chest.

Sirius has to stop himself for a moment. He counts back the days diligently, one by one. It’s the twentieth of July, and he’s alive. He’s in Iceland, and it’s cold and silent, and he’s alive. Rosier Manor is miles and miles behind him, so far away it can’t see him anymore, and he’s alive. Pierre Rosier screamed and huffed and cried like a pig under the cruciatus curse, and he’s alive.

He takes a deep breath. In. Out. In. Out.

He should have killed Pierre while he had the chance. A part of him had been scared of what James might say.

The waitress approaches the table, soft-footed like she’s creeping up on him. Sirius leashes his paranoia like a rabid dog and smiles up at her. Tentatively, she smiles back.

“Uh,” she says, remembering that he’s not from here.
“More coffee?”

“Yes, please,” Sirius mumbles. If there’s one language he’s never had to speak, it’s fucking Icelandic. “Thank you.”

He pushes a few more euros across the table, and she shakes her head. She opens her mouth as if to say something, and the language barrier stretching between them is apparently too high a wall to climb, because she just shakes her head again, refills his coffee and pads off to the back of the coffee shop again.

Sirius figures he looks pathetic enough to warrant that. Or maybe that’s just their way of roping in foreigners.

His lists stare up at him from the wooden table, their yellow too bright. To avoid looking at them, Sirius stares out of the window, over the grey twilight. It's always grey out here, the sky flat and mottled like drying paint. The ocean roars distantly, the shore breaking in the lagoon. This town is beautiful, even despite its name. It feels haunted, but everywhere feels haunted these days. Honestly, Sirius is just glad for the lack of sun. His skin feels tender like a raw nerve with all the time in that fucking cellar.

It's a lot to take in, the beauty of it. They don't have northern lights up here -- not any that Sirius has seen, anyway -- but it's quiet and pristine, like outside of the towns nobody has touched it. In the opposite direction of the lagoon, stretching out north, the ice flats span broad over the horizon, lilting with soft hills and shallow mountains, tipped with thick snow.

Sirius finishes his coffee. This place is open until late, and he really, really doesn't want to go back to the cave yet, so he puts his head down against the window pane and closes his eyes and drifts for a while, not sleeping fully (he's far too paranoid for that) but allowing himself a moment of respite in the quiet warmth.

Dumbledore's mangled, burned face, the hanging eye socket. James, staring at him from the floor in the cellar, bloody around the ribs, wearing Andromeda's face. Riddle's laugh two weeks ago, when Sirius saw him last before the wedding. How he smiled at him.

Sirius opens his eyes again. No time for rest. The world is going to haunt him until he does what he has to do.

Jamie,

It's a few days later. I'm in a cafe now, so that's something. Carrying on.

That next time, we didn't go back to sunny France. It was evening, and Riddle took me with him to a cavern. Somewhere near the ocean. I could hear the waves crashing on the rocks.

There was an old muggle man lying on the stone. He sat me down on a rock and told me to watch and I watched as Riddle killed the guy, cold blood, one killing curse to the head without a second of hesitation. The man was alive and then he was just gone. Still and stiff and like he'd never been alive in the first place. He didn't even seem to enjoy it. Just did it and then turned back to me and said, like a magician, watch this, and I kept watching, because I couldn't look away. You don't really know what death looks like til you see it and I'm never going to forget it as long as I live which, hey, might not be that long, at the rate I'm going.

The ritual was long. I don't want to describe it, Prongs. Blood and bone and other such terrible things. It's weird but I can still remember how cold the stone I was sitting on made me, how much my back hurt with the way I was positioned. I don't remember the incantation, and I don't remember the light, what colour it was, how long it took. I just remember shaking and shivering as the damp set into the stone and watching something dark and coarse like sand whipping into a frenzy, loud and quick, and then he dropped a locket into my lap.

Stopping for now. Fuck, Jamie. Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck.

Love you. Hope you're thinking of me, wherever you are (Godric's Hollow or South Wales, I'd bet!). Hope you never

let me out of your stupid head. That's only half a joke.

- Sirius Orion Black.

If there's a wizarding community in Iceland, it's well hidden. Sirius hitchhikes south the following day, crouched low in the back of a pickup truck, head bowed against the blistering northern winds. The grey Atlantic churns dark alongside the road, so wide it's almost monstrous. He isn't used to the ocean. London used to feel wide, when he was young, staring out of the top window of 12 Grimmauld Place. If only his younger self had known.

He makes it to Reykjavik by that evening, thoroughly windswept and stinking like dead fish. Sirius slips into what he thinks is a general store, bright and airy and aisled on the outside of the stout little seaside city, and steals a sweatshirt and a pair of oversized muggle jeans. If he was James or Remus, he might have left a few coins on the shelf in apology, but he's not, so he doesn't.

Food is too risky. When spying for thieves, muggles look for food, alcohol, razors, tampons. Sirius makes for the exit of the shop and nobody follows after him.

He gets changed in a public bathroom nearby and then just sits in a stall, head in his hands, for a long time. He keeps his head low for so long that all the blood rushes up to his ears and the white room seems to tremble around him, the floor almost shaking. Heat floods his face. He stays like that regardless.

Mangled face. Riddle's laugh. *Fuck.*

Sirius doesn't cry. As a rule, he doesn't cry. He's never cried in front of James or Remus or Peter, and in his memory, he

hasn't cried in front of Regulus, either, though he might've when he was small, though in that case, Reg wouldn't remember it so it doesn't count. He can't remember the last time he cried for anybody or anything. He's not sure he's quite able to, at this point.

And in this muggle bathroom stall, bless his weary, exhausted heart, he still doesn't cry. That would break down every single wall he's forced up around himself since that evening in June last year. Since he was thirteen and met Riddle. Since he was eleven, realising he's going to spend his life fighting in a blood war. So he doesn't fucking cry.

(He comes close, though.)

When a stranger on the edge of the city offers him money-in-hand labour in exchange for his lifting power, carrying boxes on and off unregistered tankers in a blackened lagoon a few miles from a cheap hotel, Sirius agrees wholeheartedly. If his rotten old mother could only see him now, he supposes, and steals another change of clothes on the night he gets his first pay.

Jamie,

Carrying on. It's been two weeks now, since that night. Sorry it took me so long to get back on this. In my defence, I'm a bit of a mess right now. You'd laugh at me if you could see the sorry state I'm in.

I'm in a hotel now, not a cave or a cafe. Moving up in the world! A muggle man who boxes up contraband a mile off the port offered me a wage for my muscle. It's illegal, I think. Still, it's enough to get me a bed, and he speaks

pretty good English, and he tells the wildest stories. Still not telling you where I am, but there's your tip, I suppose: wherever I am, they sell drugs here. Really narrows it down, huh? I love muggles. Bless their souls.

Anyway. The ritual.

Here's my disclaimer, because you love those, just conceptually: I am NOT telling you what this ritual did. I'm not telling you how he did it, or why, or what came of it. I know you wouldn't do anything with the information, Jamie, but bad people would, so I'm saying nothing, and you can't change my mind. You told me two weeks ago you didn't care what it was I knew. If you knew how important it was, you would.

Anyway, back to the story. Enthralling, isn't it? Real tale of woe.

After the ritual was done, and the man was dead, Riddle dropped this locket into my lap. He sat down in front of me and waited until I'd stopped freaking out. What a fucking gentleman, am I right? When I'd sort of gotten myself together, he grabbed my shoulder and he gestured around all grand and big and important, and he told me he'd like to change the world. I thought he was bloody insane by this point, but I also didn't want to die (a plus, honestly, because I'm not sure I feel like that anymore), so I didn't say anything. Just watched him.

To make a long story short, he explained what he had done to me in quite some detail. What his plan for the world was, what he was going to do to get there. His face had changed. Eyes. They were all yellow.

(You see where I'm going with this. Right?)

He changed that night. Changed at his very core. And he told me I was a smart man, I was hungry, hungry like he'd been at my age, so he wanted me to come with him while he made himself stronger. He wasn't going to stop at one, and he pressed this ugly awful locket into my hand and told me I could change the world with him, if I liked, because the traits in me that had landed me in Gryffindor were valuable, strong and unyielding, and he could sense something unique in me.

It wasn't an offer. That's the catch there, Prongs. It wasn't a fucking offer.

When he thought I'd gotten the message, he took the locket back off me, told me he was going to hide it. I almost asked him where and then figured I would rather keep my head on my shoulders, and he dropped me back home, on the rug in the entrance hall, and then he was gone.

For a long while, I think I convinced myself it had been a dream. Reg tried to get through to me for days and couldn't and I think it scared the shit out of him. I was still sort of in a daze when he came next, a week later, picked me up from my parents' house without warning them and dragged me out to the Eastern European diaspora, somewhere with a black forest and a huge lake. His eyes were different. I knew it for sure that time.

He sat me down at the lake and told me, again, he wanted to change the world with me.

When people talk about maniacs, I think we assume that it's a personality thing. Heads up, Jamie, and if you've ever learned anything from my awful self I want it to be this; it's got nothing to do with personality. It's not even really got anything to do with temperament, or how much you can

stomach. It's all in how you look at the world. The categories you sort it into. It can be upbringing, sure, but I grew up a Black and I pride myself on not being a raging, racist lunatic, and Riddle grew up in the muggle world without two pennies to rub together, from what he's told me, so it's not only that. It's about who you're willing to sacrifice to build the world as you see fit. To create it in your image.

I learned a lot about Riddle in those visits. Not just what he's willing to do (watching him kill that muggle man told me a lot about that, though), but what his ideal future looked like. Who he wanted his new world to be populated with. I think I figured out how his brain worked, and I think a part of him wanted me to figure it out, you know?

I don't know what it was about me that drew him to me. I still don't and I never did. But I'm terrified of it, whatever it is.

I'm sort of scared of it all. Not just what he saw in me, but what he would've done to me had I not gone to Dumbledore. What he still might do. I don't care if he tortures me. He could've done that plenty already. In a way, he has. It's not really that bit that scares me.

It's what he wanted me to be. A mentee, I thought, at the beginning of it all. A protegee. Somebody to follow in his footsteps. But after I learned he intends to live forever, well, that sort of went out the fucking window, didn't it? And I can't stop thinking about it. The way he fucking looked at me. Like I could do half the things he could. Like I was like him. I'm nothing like him. Nothing at all. Or that's what I keep telling myself.

Anyway. My bloody stupid hands. Give me a sec.

Love you.

- Sirius Orion Black.

“Your son,” Riddle says, in a dream. Eyes brown, not yellow. It’s that first night again. Dinner table in the heart of Grimmauld. Low lights hanging over all their dark heads. “No, not the spare. Sirius, his name is? Your eldest. Bright boy, I’ve heard.”

Sirius’ sharp, bright, Gryffindor heart had shrivelled when he first heard that. *Keep your head down*, James’ voice had spoken in his ear, and Regulus’ eyes had born into him from across the table, the colour of deliverance, and it was wonderful, for that sharp, blinding moment, how in control Sirius felt. Like surely, he could do this.

“Thank you, sir,” he mumbles. The dream again. Less memory and more mirage. It’s a quiet sort of defeat.

Riddle eyes him across the black wood table, looks him up and down. Sirius feels distinctly undressed. It’s the first time they’ve met, and he already wants to peel himself out of his skin. He’s not even a third year yet. He’s not ready to die at war.

“You’re a Gryffindor,” Riddle observes. Walburga winces. “I remember it. The scandal of that. Quite the hot topic of conversation. People speculated that your parents had gone soft, you know, Sirius.”

“Four people tried to poison my food on my first full day, sir,” Sirius says. “I’ve got lots of cousins.” His stomach churns and he loses his appetite.

Riddle smiles mildly. "Please," he says, face distorting, hair ripping free from his scalp. "Call me Tom, Sirius."

"Tom," Sirius says. It comes out clear as a bell.

Riddle smiles at him indulgently. "I'm sure your parents have mentioned me."

They had. Not just them. Riddle's name had been following Sirius for most of his life by that point and it hasn't stopped yet.

"Yes, sir," Sirius says. "Yes, I know a little about you."

"Would you like to know more?" Riddle offers.

Orion clears his throat. "I'm sure Regulus might be more fitting, Mr. Riddle, what with their difference in temperament... we knew since his sorting, you see, that Sirius isn't quite the... the discerning type. Doesn't think his decisions through. Makes bad friends." *He'll get himself killed and then we can forget he ever existed and Regulus can take his place.*

Riddle doesn't look away from Sirius' face. "I was looking for a Gryffindor," he says pleasantly. "I find that some diversity in traits, in values, benefits any organisation. Even a family. Don't you agree, Orion?"

Orion's face goes bloodless. Sirius thinks he might slump out of his chair. "I can see what you mean," he says stiffly.

"Yes." Riddle's benign face melts with the decay of a bad memory. "I've been meaning to meet you for some time, Sirius Black."

Sirius wakes up shaking. Yellowish light from a streetlamp outside streaks across the bedsheets in sharp tendrils. Every shape in the room looms out at him like it's going to step into the light and reveal itself to have been Riddle the whole time. The sound of the ocean does little to calm his burning heart, his screaming lungs.

He shrugs on a sweatshirt and stalks out of the hotel for a walk to cool his head. The ocean laps high against the shore of Reykjavik, only a few streets down. Sirius slips through an alleyway bisecting two streets and then another, the dark seawall stretching into view in the distance, past the glare of the few streetlamps still bright this time of night. An economic country, Iceland is. Not too much of anything, except for Sirius Black, because any amount of Sirius is too much, he's found recently.

The railing overlooking the bay is cold under him as Sirius clambers over it to sit atop the thin, painted metal. Under his feet, black water stretches out towards the fishing boats, lined up under the bright moon. Waxing gibbous. Soon, it'll be a full.

Wind off the ocean whips him in the face, blowing the hair back off his face, cold in every crevice of his skin. It was never very windy in London. The air felt thicker, particles like dust and petrol fumes and weed smell clogging up all their lungs. When Sirius closes his eyes, he can still smell herb, can still taste blood. Home rots in the back of his throat, sticking like gum.

It's been three weeks now, since that night. Three weeks and nothing to do but cower. Sirius wonders if they have English-speaking therapists in Iceland, and then, retroactively, how much they cost to contract.

Well. Either starvation or the nightmares are going to kill him one of these days. Sirius supposes himself lucky that he gets the privilege of choosing his poison.

He sighs and stuffs his hands into his pockets, staring down into the murky black depths of the bay. One slip and the cold would consume him. One split-second decision and he could lose himself to the black for just a little while, like a contact high or blood loss or something else nobody really takes seriously.

Tucked into the inside pocket of his sweatshirt, the two halves of James' wand clink together. Their hollow, wooden sound crackles on the air.

Sirius reaches in and pulls them out, rolling them around in his hand. The mahogany is blackened around the break. Unicorn hair sticks out the end.

James laughing at his stupid jokes. James grinning over his breakfast at Sirius. James tagging Sirius on to the end of all his sentences, ever brag and every joke. James' warm hands. James' worry, deep like the Atlantic and twice as angry.

Sirius leans back and hurls each half of the wand into the ocean, watching them arc high through the air and land in the water of the bay with two deep plops. They vanish under the waves.

The sight of it makes him want to cry. But he doesn't fucking cry, so that's that, Sirius supposes, and watches the waves settle.

It takes him five minutes to feel the eyes on him. Which is a surprisingly long while, for how paranoid he's been for years now.

Sirius doesn't let himself stiffen. If it's a suspicious muggle, they'll soon move on, or get closer to interrogate him. If it's something else, then they're not approaching yet. Just observing. Maybe to find a weak spot. He won't give them one that easily.

Footsteps on the cobblestone, light and easy. Sirius doesn't move, still, even as they get closer, not right until they stop next to him and two pale arms settle atop the railing, five or six feet away.

Only then does he look over.

It's a woman -- forty, fifty, maybe. Stocky, with silvery grey hair and a no-nonsense sort of face.

She looks right back at him. She's below him, standing at her short height while Sirius sits tall on the railing. She somehow manages to make him feel shorter than her anyway.

"We've heard it's bad in Britain," she says. "But I think throwing your wand away is a bit of a rash move."

Thick, Icelandic accent, with some Slavic in it. Sort of Russian-ish. It reminds Sirius of Serbia.

"You've been watching me," he accuses her.

"Since you got to Reykjavik, yes."

"How did you know I'm magic?"

"We didn't know for sure." She sighs, raking a hand back through her hair. Sirius sees now that it's not tied back like he thought it was, but slicked back with gel. Short and punkish. "But they've posted your wanted poster all over

the British papers, and one of our own still gets the Prophet delivered. He buys pot from your boss."

"Oh."

"He wasn't certain. But we know now, I suppose."

"Do you plan on handing me in?" Sirius asks.

"Depends." The woman eyes him. "Do you plan on running from him forever?"

"I can run pretty fast."

She barks out a laugh. "I like you, Black."

Sirius forces a very tentative smile. "You're not going to apparate me back to London."

"No. No, not tonight." She sticks out a hand to him.
"Galina."

"Sirius."

"Nice to meet you, Sirius." She's got a very firm grip.
"There aren't many of us here. We've got beds to spare, if you need one."

Sirius shakes his head. "I've got my hotel room."

"Then we've got protection to share. Wandless as you are, you might need it."

He considers that for a moment. "Information?"

"As much as we can get you, yes."

"Why?" Sirius demands.

Galina looks at him, and her dark eyes are very sad in that moment. "Son," she sighs. "I would very much just like to see you come down off that railing, for now. The rest, we can deal with later."

I'm not bloody suicidal, Sirius almost says, but he doesn't think she'd believe him any more than he'd believe himself.

Instead, he nods shakily. Slowly, he twists and throws his legs over the railing and hops down onto the cobblestone of the pier.

Galina smiles at him. She's still shorter than him, but not by much. "Tonight?" she asks.

Sirius shakes his head. "Tomorrow," he says. "I'll come here again tomorrow."

"Alright, Sirius. I will, too."

She turns and strides off towards the streets. Sirius watches her leave and, for the first time since he ran from Rosier Manor, for a handful of sure moments, he doesn't fear death.

Jamie,

I'm on a break at work. Bloody hell, my arms ache. I'm not built for manual labour. Sucks being a delicate flower.

I sat down to carry on telling you my long, long story, and then I felt super fucking guilty about... everything, so. I guess this short one is just to say this:

I've kept a lot from you for the past two years. Three, now, I suppose. I was thirteen when I met him and I never told

you. Or Remus, don't worry. Or Pete. Or anybody. Reg knew, but there's very little of anything Reg doesn't know about me, so.

It was a lot of stress. I worry that it changed me. I tried to stay the same as I'd been and I think I succeeded in being an arrogant arsehole, and a good friend once in a blue moon (hah!), and I hope none of you blame yourselves for how I turned out. Remus figured it out, I think, at least a little bit. That there was somebody hurting me. I don't think you ever did, Jamie, and Pete, no offence, but you're a lost cause when it comes to investigative thinking, so that was a bust.

'Hurting me'. Haha. Bad wording. Riddle didn't hurt me, not really. Not in essential terms. How can you be terrified of a person for years and never try to run? Not until you absolutely have to? I don't know. Guess it makes me spineless. So much for being the Gryffindor he needed to mould into a pet lion. I'm Black to my very fucking core.

How self-pitying this one is getting! Awful! I hate it. I hate all of this. I hate this stupid country and this stupid city and I hate that I stink of pot and fish all the time now. I hate knowing you all might already be dead, if you haven't been careful enough. I hate knowing he's looking for me. I spend an absurd amount of time imagining what he'll say when he finds me. That's not normal, is it? I shouldn't care. But I do. I do. I do.

Bloody hell. Bet you're all getting tired of my fucking sob story about getting fucking groomed by the fucking dark lord. It feels like a telenovela. Is that how the muggles spell that? The only English-speaking channel on TV here is BBC World News. Bless muggles, truly, for not knowing what's going on. Makes everything feel a little less shit.

I love you, James. I worry that with all the time I spent trying to act normal and not weird and not sad I didn't say it enough. But I love you. Thanks for trying to save me. It meant a lot.

Back to work. I'll carry on telling the stupid thing when I've got the strength.

Love you.

- Sirius Orion Black.

Galina meets him at the railing again that evening. Sirius isn't sitting on it this time, just leaning up against it, maybe to prove a point. She comes up alongside him and watches the dark ocean with him for a while. Together they listen to the seagulls caw, the hulls of the boats in the harbour swaying and groaning.

"You're looking healthier today," she notes. "Colour in your cheeks."

"You mother me like a babooshka. Knew you sounded Russian. Or some kind of Slavic, anyway."

"Been working?"

"Yeah. All day." Sirius fiddles with the wad of euros in his pocket. Thin though it is, it's enough to keep surviving. "Haven't figured out who your guy is yet. Guess I will be now."

"You're coming with me, then?"

"Just to see," Sirius warns. "Not to stay."

“Of course,” Galina says graciously. “Follow me.”

She leads him across the cobblestone, through a dark alleyway and onto a four-lane street, cutting through crowds of commuters. Sirius barely keeps up with her. Reykjavik is a short city, stout and without much variation in height, like it was built under a sky that sits lower than London’s does. Squat grey high-rises shoot up around them both, skewering the grey sky as Galina leads Sirius down the high street and under a bus stop, and then across a blinking crossing, cars roaring impatiently on either side of them.

Sirius finds himself jogging to keep pace. He doesn’t complain.

She and Sirius duck down through an underground parking lot and then squeeze back out into the daylight on the other side of it, around the narrow back of the tall office building the lot sits under. Here, she leads Sirius around the back of a steely muggle power box, sticking out of the brambles that leech out of the concrete, and then up a makeshift set of wooden steps and to a tall fence overlooking the next property over.

“You, first,” she instructs Sirius. “Up and over. Hands over the top, like that--”

Sirius hauls himself over the fence and drops down into a patch of dewy grass. In front of him lies a strip of dying, flooded greenery and, beyond it, a grey block of flats.

Galina drops down beside him. “Come on,” she says tersely, and starts off towards the apartments. Sloshing through the wet mud, Sirius follows her, feeling distinctly like a drowned rat, which is ironic, when he thinks about it.

At the door, glass and low, she buzzes the basement apartment, number 001. They take ten long seconds to answer, in which Sirius folds his arms around himself, tucking himself against the wall to hide from the bitter chill.

"Halló?" a man's voice asks, crackling through the staticky intercom.

"Það er Galina. Ég er kominn með flóttann okkar," Galina says in a low voice. "He doesn't speak Icelandic," she says in English, then. "So let's do our best to be inviting."

"Okay," the man's voice agrees, distinctly more amicable-sounding. "Come on in."

The glass door's hinge loosens, the lock sliding out of place with a sharp snap. Galina holds the door open for Sirius, who shuffles under her arm to get into the warmth of the entrance hall.

Down the stairs to the basement, Galina leads him. "You're lucky both of us speak English," she says conversationally. "Magical translators are murder."

Not for the first time, Sirius thinks himself an idiot for having walked so easily, so uncomplainingly, into his demise.

When the door to the basement apartment opens, Riddle is not, in fact, sitting inside waiting for him. What is inside is a man Sirius vaguely recognises, East Asian and smiling grimly at Galina, then Sirius.

"Come on," he says, voice faintly accented. "No use talking on doorsteps." Part Scots, part Nordic.

Galina ushers Sirius inside. When he gets over the threshold, he stops to stare around.

The apartment is small with no entrance area -- the door opens straight onto a small, cramped kitchen, the walls and table pasted with maps and posters and other such memorabilia. The cupboards are scratched and aged. It smells of white tea, paper and tobacco. There are vinyl records stuck to the side of the fridge.

It looks every part the shabby, grassroots resistance headquarters. One of the wall posters, the largest, is hand-painted and reads, ‘ *ET LAND BYGGET I BLOD DØR UNG* ’ over an illustration of a red dog snapping at a white hand.

“That’s Norwegian,” Sirius recognises, before he can stop himself. “Dunno what it says, though.”

“A state built in blood dies young,” Galina quotes, pride burning up in her voice. “Welcome to the only resistance base in Iceland, Sirius Black.”

“Thanks,” Sirius mutters. He turns to look at Galina, then the other man. “Resisting what, exactly?”

Galina smiles grimly. Under the warmer light, the popped blood vessels around her mouth stand out. She looked bloodied and worn. “Britain isn’t the only magical country under siege by fascist powers. Come, sit in the other room. Yí’ān, you don’t mind making us tea? Something English.”

Yí’ān grins at her. “When do I ever mind doing anything for you, Lina? Get our guest comfortable, I’ll be right there.”

The living room is even more crowded. In the corner, a converted coat rack holds five or six long rural rifles, the type farmers use to kill livestock, with dark wooden barrels

that shine in the light from the bulb set into the ceiling. A long table sits between shabby couches, likewise covered in papers, notebooks, maps. A glass vase full of stolen wands sits on the floor by the empty fireplace. The walls are coated with more bright, hand-painted posters. Big, blown-up moving photographs too, of demonstrations, marches, murals. Arrests. Executions. One holds a gruesome depiction of a dementor's kiss.

Maybe not so cheery after all. There's a bloody history in these walls.

Sirius curls into a knot in an armchair in the corner, tucking his hands into his sleeves and staring around. Galina takes a seat on the opposite sofa, absently reaching out to straighten the papers on the big table. With a flick of her wand, the high window looking out over the wet grass, set into the top of the wall above Sirius, swings shut, blinds folding closed across it.

"Paranoid?" Sirius asks, half joking.

"You've no idea," Galina agrees. "You're comfortable there?"

It's an odd question. Sirius can't remember the last time he was comfortable anywhere. "Yeah. I'm fine."

"Good. Good, that's... good." Her piercing eyes scrape over him. It's different from Riddle, though. Kinder, in a way.

Yíān shuffles in, balancing three mismatched mugs of white English tea. He hands one to Sirius and another to Galina, then cups his own as he sits down beside her, watching Sirius. Sirius gets the inexplicable feeling of a child being called into a wellbeing meeting with adult teachers.

“So,” Yí’ān says. “I was the one that noticed you, by the way. I thought about not saying anything, for a bit, but... well, you look sort of pathetic, so.”

“Thanks,” Sirius says dryly. Then, “Scottish?”

“For some of my life,” Yí’ān agrees. “My family are from Taiwan. I grew up in Newcastle. Went to Durmstrang for two or three years when I was eleven.” He winces audibly. “Didn’t last much longer than that. Decided to take a more independent route of education. I met Galina when I was, what, sixteen? Seventeen?”

“How old are you now?”

“Twenty-five.”

Yí’ān doesn’t look it. Sirius would have thought he was his own age. There’s a levity to his face that is rare to see these days.

“Durmstrang,” Sirius repeats. “Why didn’t your parents send you to Hogwarts?”

Yí’ān’s face drops, but only slightly. A cheery disposition all-round. Sirius is distinctly reminded of James. “Not a British citizen, was I? And my folks weren’t about to send me back to Taiwan for school, and Beauxbatons requires French or German citizenship, too. Durmstrang isn’t... well. It certainly isn’t progressive, but it was willing to take me without papers. So when I was eleven, I went.”

Sirius doesn’t know a lot about Durmstrang, but what he does know... “It wasn’t good.”

“No,” Yí’ān says easily. There’s a sort of hardness to it, though. Like when comedians tell jokes about trauma.

"Nah, it sucked. Nasty place, Durmstrang. Nasty principles. My dad died when I was twelve -- cancer, would you believe it? -- and my mother knew how awful it was for me there, so... well. When I dropped out, she didn't stop me."

"He ended up travelling with a group of for-hire cursebreakers," Galina says shortly. "When we met, he decided to stay in Iceland."

"So you're the one that started this?" Sirius asks. He waves his hand around the room. "This whole... thing?"

"That's me." Galina smiles faintly. "It's not just the two of us. We've got contacts all around the country, and a few beyond it."

"Used to call us the Durmstrang Survivors' Support Network," Yí'ān guffaws.

"You went there, too?"

Galina nods. "Most northern and eastern Europeans end up at Durmstrang. I'm Ukranian, and Russia's schools were an option for me, but unluckily, I suppose, I never spoke very good Russian, so Durmstrang it was."

"And it was... was really that awful?"

Galina's face hardens. She leans back slightly, appraising Sirius. "Almost every young witch, wizard and wizarding-person this end of Europe goes to Durmstrang. It's one of the only options for most of us, especially those from--" She smiles ironically. "Turbulent beginnings."

Yí'ān laughs affectionately at that.

“There’s just something quite different about Durmstrang to Hogwarts. And I think you know what it is,” she tells Sirius.

It hits him. “They don’t accept muggleborns,” Sirius says.

“It’s not just that,” Yí’ān says darkly. “It’s a whole bloody blood-ranking hierarchy in there. Dirtier blood gets you lower marks. Lower marks gets you beaten or suspended. If they think you’ll complain, they intercept your owls.”

Sirius’ heart clenches. *Regulus*. Soft, bookish Reg, stuck in a place like that. It’s going to crush him like a butterfly in a wheel. He doesn’t say anything, though. He doesn’t trust them quite enough for that yet.

“This isn’t about our bad schooling,” Galina says, then, and waves Yí’ān into silence. “That’s not what this is for.”

“Then what is it for?” Sirius asks.

“Think about it,” Galina says, and leans across the table. “Most poorer European countries don’t even *have* magical authorities. No ministries, no regulations, no laws. No country to fight for. When wizards don’t have a country to fight for, what do you think they turn to to find allegiance?”

Sirius thinks of Grimmauld Place. “Blood,” he says grimly.

“And when the only education most of us get offered is bloody Durmstrang,” Yí’ān says, “What’d’ya reckon that says about the political climate? With muggleborns going their lives never knowing, never learning. Wandless and anonymous. With all our power centralised in blood politics. It starts at school, y’know. Everything starts at school.”

Sirius feels stupid. “Oh. Hence, resistance group.”

Galina nods, jaw tight. "Hence, resistance group."

Yí'ān's jolly face falls. "When we heard about Dumbledore, about Britain falling, it... well. Guess it was a blow to morale. What's his name? Lord something-or-other? Another crazy bloody blood purist. We've seen it all before. Time and time and time again. Your ministry's gone under, by the way. In case you didn't know. Minister's imperius'd. They did that to the wizarding minister of Albania a few years ago, when it went under, too."

"Makes you wonder if it's ever due to stop," Galina says darkly.

Sirius' headache intensifies. "Riddle," he manages to croak. "The guy who's taken over. His name is Tom Riddle."

Yí'ān tilts his head to the side, sipping his tea. "Not much of a name. Doesn't strike fear into me, personally."

That makes one of us.

"Nasty piece of work, I've heard," Galina agrees. "Hogwarts educated. Pureblood fanatic. White supremacist, by the sound of it. Intensely isolationist, at least, so we know he won't be making any allegiances with his greater European counterparts."

Yí'ān nods. "Though it'd be best to keep an eye on that, just in case."

"Think you can get in contact with Hanne?"

"Of course. They always answer my owls, they love me."

Listening to their banter, Sirius drinks his own tea in turn, feels it scald on the way down into his stomach. He puts his

mug down on the floor and looks up at Yí'ān and Galina.

"I want to kill him," Sirius says. "Riddle."

Silence, for a moment.

"Well," Yí'ān starts, "I'd like to kill the lot of them, too, but it's--"

Galina holds up an aged hand and he falls silent immediately. She narrows her dark eyes at Sirius.

"You know him, don't you?" she asks softly. "He's hunting you. Riddle."

Yí'ān's eyes go wide. Sirius stares at the floor, then nods, just once.

"Tell us everything," Galina says. It's not a demand. More like an offer.

"We're gonna need more tea," Yí'ān says faintly.

Sirius nods. "We are," he says. "And you have to promise me you'll help me. *Please*. I can't say it all. There's stuff I can't share. But for what I can..."

Yí'ān's already stood up, and his hand lands on Sirius' shoulder, warm and large. "That's what we're here for," he says gently, and in that moment he sounds all his twenty-three years and more. A warmth fills Sirius' stomach that feels sort of like being safe. "We don't do this for kicks."

Galina nods from her place on the other sofa. She looks very tired for a moment. "The fight against imperialism," she says exhaustively, "It's not one war. It's lots of smaller

wars, motivated by large, terrible things. And if we can win yours, we can win them all.”

“Thanks,” Sirius says. He really means it. “I was born into a pureblood family--”

Yí’ān waves his hand in front of Sirius’ face. “Tea, first,” he commands. “The British way. Then, traumatic runaway story. Okay?”

Sirius laughs for the first time in what feels like years. It comes gurgling out of his throat like blood in a drainpipe. “Okay. Okay, I can do that.”

If James was here right now, Sirius is sure he’d be laughing, too.

Chapter End Notes

- [Official Tumblr](#)
- [Twitter Quotes Bot](#) (admin: [lupinlesbian](#))
- [Pinterest Board](#) (admin: [plantfeline](#))
- [Fic Playlist](#)
- [Podfic](#)

If you’re enjoying this fic, please considering leaving me a comment or an [ask](#)!

AFTERMATH

Chapter Notes

every day i wake up and listen to my silly little spotify fic playlist and write my silly little chapters. aside from 'this body means nothing to me' by shrimp, 'the troubles' by u2 and 'reunite' by isbells have been really big inspirations. they rly get the mood. plus the troubles has the line 'i have a will for survival, so you can hurt me, then hurt me some more' which just makes me very sad about sirius, so.

in case anybody was wondering, bc im in the mood to ramble a little: this fic has such an emphasis on the south coast of wales bc that's where i grew up, and where i'm currently living! the ghostly lights from somerset and the roaring of the ocean, it all feels like home to me, which is why it feels so much like home to remus, too. it's nice to write abt in that sense, sort of theraputic , yknow?

anywho, enjoy the chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

MINISTER FOR MAGIC USHERS IN NEW WIZARDING SAFETY MEASURES

Daily Prophet, Evening Edition, August 3rd, 1976.

In a press release to *The Prophet* this morning, Minister Harold Minchum has announced the success of a radical new bill, the Act For The Protection Of Wizarding Welfare, in the Wizengamot. In its first session since the death of its previous Chief Warlock, the Wizengamot voted unanimously

to pass the Act, which requires that each of-age wizard and witch in Britain register their wand at the Ministry.

“We do not intend to revoke any liberties of any magical family in Britain,” Minchum told interviewers. “But with the rise of foriegn threats to our community’s safety, the Ministry has found that no other option exists than tighter regulations and registrations on wizarding Britain. After the murder of the late Albus Dumbledore by unknown persons, this bill will allow us to regulate magic use and ensure no unregistered wizard or witch can use unlawful magic, under threat of fine or imprisonment.”

When asked which prerequisites will be required for successful magical registration, Minchum told *The Prophet*, “A set of at least five OWLs, no criminal history, other such things. Nothing any normal wizard or witch would have to worry about, of course.”

With the killer of previous Hogwarts headmaster Albus Dumbledore still unidentified, and rumours of foriegn violence rampant throughout the Ministry, this motion is supported by the majority of the British wizarding community.

A ministry worker has told *The Prophet*, “We’ll all feel safer in our beds knowing that our country is being protected from violence by ill-intentioned wizards. I’ve got kids, and I feel far, far safer knowing they’ll live in a world that takes their wellbeing and education seriously.”

August 10th, 1976.

Mr. Remus Lupin,

Your return to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry will commence on September 1st, when the Hogwarts Express will depart from Platform 9¾, King's Cross Station, London. The term will begin Monday, September 3rd. Following your OWL results, each class you have elected to take this year is available to you, and no schedule changes shall be needed.

Sixth-year students will require:

- The Standard Book Of Spells, Grade 6 by Miranda Goshawk*
- Advanced Potion-Making by Libatius Borage (if studying NEWT level Potions)*
- Contaminants: On the Identification and Extermination of Dark Creatures, Half-Breeds and Invasive Magical Species by Nathaniel Travers (if studying NEWT level Defence Against the Dark Arts)*
- A Guide To Advanced Transfiguration by Emerik Switch (if studying NEWT level Transfiguration)*
- Advanced Rune Translation by Yuri Blishen (if studying NEWT level Translation of Ancient Runes)*

In addition, in accordance with Ministry regulations, each new and returning student will be required to register their wand with a member of staff on arrival to the castle.

Failure to do so will result in disciplinary action.

Unregulated use of magic on castle grounds is strictly prohibited.

Kind regards,

Professor McGonagall, Acting Headmistress of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

EXCLUSIVE: Inside The Home Of Newly Married Bellatrix (Black) Lestrangle

Witch Weekly, Sunday edition, August 17th, 1976.

Lestrangle Manor, a ten-bedroom regency-era country house, sits on an idyllic river that runs through the Hampshire countryside. Stately and rich with heritage, it is the home of Bellatrix and Rodolphus Lestrangle, the hottest new couple on the scene, who were married in a small, private ceremony last week.

“After the terrible violent breakout at the recent wedding at Rosier Manor,” Bellatrix told *Witch Weekly* interviewers this morning, “We wanted to ensure our union would be safe and peaceful. Surrounded by family, of course, but closed to the public. Especially with Albus Dumbledore’s killer still unknown... it’s awful.”

Rodolphus and Bellatrix, clearly enthralled with one another, make a stunning couple. Bellatrix, of the esteemed Black family, holds her family’s striking good looks, softened only by the warmth of new love. Rodolphus’ Lestrangle heritage has gifted him a sculpted physique, robes or otherwise.

“I think we’ll get on well with one another, living together like this,” Bellatrix went on to say, glowing with happiness. “I work from home for a wizarding heritage society, I have for years now, so I’m good for keeping the house. Rodolphus’ work at the ministry keeps him busy, what with the wonderful new overhauls taking place, but I’m always here for him when he gets home.”

When asked to comment on recent Ministry affairs, Rodolphus had little to say. “I’m proud to be doing what needs to be done. Whatever it takes to keep wizarding

Britain safe, rest assured that the ministry is doing their utmost."

(Pictures enclosed on page three.)

August 21st, 1976.

Remus,

Are you going back to Hogwarts? Mum thinks I should, but I don't know. She says it'll be safer now, but it won't really be the same without Dumbledore there, especially with whoever killed him running around. Don't know what the papers are talking about -- what foreign threat? Is you-know-who foreign? Wonder if it was him that got Dumbledore. Nobody saw it, right? How did that happen?

Bloody strange, all of this. Sorry I've been bad for keeping up contact. It's been a hard few months. Write back to me soon! And... is James okay? I haven't heard from him.

Peter.

CONTROVERSY AT MINISTRY AS ACTIVISTS PROTEST NEW CURRICULUM

Daily Prophet, Evening Edition, August 24th, 1976.

Rioting broke out in the Ministry entrance hall this morning in response to a change in Hogwarts' Defence Against the Dark Arts curriculum. Twenty-five protestors, holding signs and blockading floo entrances, demonstrated for over three hours, refusing to leave even upon the arrival of an Auror task force to detain and remove them. With profane slogans and disregard for the peace and comfort of ministry

workers, they only left when apparated away by law enforcement.

“We want to show the Ministry that they can’t just throw half-breeds and sentient magical creatures away,” one protestor told *The Prophet*. “They’re people, just like us. They deserve our empathy and respect, and the new books on the curriculum, they’re written by known blood supremacists, they encourage the murder of innocent, nonviolent half-breeds-- this is ludicrous, that they want to teach this to our kids, absolutely ludicrous.”

“The author,” another is quoted as saying, “He’s a known werewolf-killer. And not on full moons. He’s a violent, barbaric man, with awful, awful views on blood purity. We can’t stand for this.”

Much of the outrage sparked over the inclusion of an academic text by noted magizoologist Nathaniel Travers on the Hogwarts set-texts list this year. Having worked in magical creature studies for years, one of the most well-respected of his field, Travers has yet to comment on these allegations.

“It’s bloody ridiculous,” DMLE employee Hector Rowle told reporters, on his way into the ministry this morning. “One change in one textbook on the Hogwarts reading list and it’s like the world is ending. It’s one measly book, but people are willing to fight the toss on just about anything these days, so that’s that, I suppose. Easily offended, these types are. Violence for violence’s sake won’t convince anybody.”

“We’re thankful nobody was hurt in the ruckus,” another Ministry official has stated. “One protestor has alleged she was hurt, but since no evidence has been presented, well.

I'm just ever so grateful to the Aurors who helped us. Demonstrations like that in the workplace, they make everybody feel so unsafe..."

(Story continued on page five.)

Sirius,

It's been a month and a half since the wedding, as of today. It was the full a few nights ago, so I haven't been writing for the better part of this week, which I feel very guilty over. You'd probably call me stupid for that. It was an okay full, all in all. I didn't get James hurt, so that's something.

Prongs seems in slightly higher spirits. I think I tried to play it down to you in my last few letters, but he's been a bit of a mess for a while, since the wedding. I'm not afraid to admit that, now that there's a light at the end of the tunnel. Nightmares and a lot of middle-distance staring. He would sometimes look at me like I might disappear. The slash across his ribs doesn't even bleed much anymore, and we had to treat it non-magically, since none of us really know where to get our hands on dittany with Diagon Alley off the table, so. I'm a little proud of myself for that. Being the designated healer among us, that is.

No sign of you, still. We still get the Prophet and a handful of other papers delivered most days (James pays, refuses to do otherwise, because of course he does). They're looking for you. 'Undesirable Number One', they've been calling you. I think you'd call that an achievement. Still, no matter how hard we search through the papers and who we owl (McGonagall, your uncle Alphard, other adults who seem like they should know what they're doing), nobody seems to have any clue where you've been. Professor McGonagall

did warn us not to go back to Hogwarts for our sixth year, though, so.

That's that, I suppose.

From what we can tell, you-know-who's taken over at the ministry. He's definitely got control of the Prophet, anyway, and that's half the battle. It's hard to know how much of the public is buying into his muck about purity and registration and magical heritage and such nonsense, not when we're so far out of the way. My father hasn't come home since the night Dumbledore died. He owls occasionally. Nothing much more than that. I'm worried about him, but what can I do?

Lily's staying with us half the time, too. She seems scared for her family. I don't blame her. She's good to have around, Sirius. I know it was... hard. With James and everything. I don't know what I'm saying. Give her a chance, is what I mean. James has changed a lot.

But of course, you can't give her a chance. Not now that you're not here. We've been theorising for a while where you ran off to, and our answers are getting more and more silly. Lily thinks mainland Europe, somewhere like France or Belgium. She reckons you speak French, because that's in the Black heritage. You don't actually, do you? I don't remember you ever mentioning it to me. James thinks you've run off to America. I think you'd stick out like a sore thumb anywhere heavily populated, so I reckon you're off the grid, somewhere rural.

James has just fallen asleep on my arm, by the way, so that's a nasty case of pins and needles staring me in the face. His hair hasn't gotten any less of a mess, by the way. Between you and I, because as much of a menace as he can

be, I don't think he reads my letters behind my back: I don't think he's figured it out. The thing you and I talked about that very last time we spoke, alone in the dorm the morning of the end of term. That somebody was... well. You'd met somebody. Someone bad.

I'm glad he doesn't know. A little glad, at least. I don't know. I've considered mentioning it, when we talk theories and stuff, but I don't think it would do much aside from make him sad. There's also a selfish little bit of me that likes that it's our secret. Mine and yours. Not much is only ours, you know. Not him, anyway.

The picture of you they put in the papers for your wanted notice is staring down at me from the pinboard across the room. I should get some sleep. You were always so bloody striking. I hope you haven't cut your hair.

I know this is shorter than my usual letters, but it's... it's about all I can do, tonight. Call it latent moonsickness.

I love you. Stay safe out there, wherever you are. Remember we're looking for you.

Remus.

One day, towards the end of blisteringly hot August, Lily arrives at the nearby town with an extra duffel bag slung over her shoulder, which James promptly takes off her as the three of them trek back to Remus' house. The sun burns low over them, colliding with the sea across the channel like a great, bright bomb against the water.

"I'm going to stay for a while, if that's okay," Lily explains to them. "I'm sorry I didn't owl you in advance, Remus. I'm just... well. I'm worried about my family. If I don't go back to

Hogwarts and they try to find me, I don't want to lead them back to them."

They doesn't need elaboration, Remus supposes. The world feels like a cage of snarling dogs most days. "Of course. It's completely fine, I'm glad you came to us. Dad's got tons of stuff up around the house to keep from tracking, since he's paranoid. I don't know if it'll be enough, but..."

Lily squeezes his shoulder. "It's the best we can hope for," she says gently. *We'll have to move on soon*, she doesn't say.

James squints off into the bright sunlight, face getting all scrunchy in that lovely way it does. "We should do a food shop soon," he says absently. "If it's gonna be the three of us. Remus' mum is out often enough now that it's not even like she lives there."

Remus swats his arm. "She's busy."

"Didn't say she wasn't! She's just..." James gesticulates vaguely. "You know what I mean."

Remus smiles faintly. "I suppose so. Yeah, we should... we should get food. Tomorrow, maybe, when it's brighter."

"And you're sure it's okay that I'm here?" Lily confirms.

Nodding sanctimoniously, Remus steps over a crack in the lane and looks up at her. "Absolutely fine. I'm glad, honestly. I don't... I think power in numbers works best, if they try to find us once the school year starts and we don't go back. If we're all together, we can..."

He trails off. Fight? With the Trace still on all of them and James wandless, that doesn't seem plausible.

“Yeah,” James fills in his silence. Remus loves him. “Yeah, we’re better off together.”

He smiles at Lily, tentative like the first step into a dark room. Lily smiles back.

She cut her hair a few weeks ago, and it curls tightly around her small ears, barely two inches long all over, bits falling across her forehead as she walks. It makes her look different. Harder around the edges, less like a schoolgirl. It’s appropriate, Remus supposes. None of them are children anymore. Not in any of the ways that count.

The white shape of the house grows on the horizon. Remus feels a strange, sudden rush of affection for this place as he squints off towards it. James doesn’t like Wales, thinks the coast is haunted. Maybe it is. But Remus thinks it’s nice. He’s spent his life in South Wales and if there’s one thing it’s taught him, it’s that truly beautiful places take a long time to seem beautiful when you first see them. Youths from this region grow up with nothing and most of them leave in the end, and Remus doesn’t doubt he’ll leave someday, too, but if one place can keep their souls safe from this war, it’ll be South Wales, he’s sure of it.

James hums faintly, tuneless and dull. “Nice sunset,” he says.

“Yeah,” Remus murmurs. “Yeah, it is.”

Lily snares his hand in her own. She’s got soft skin. Remus squeezes.

“You’re okay?” she murmurs in a low, half-guilty voice. “I heard about the demonstration at the ministry, and...” She trails off. “It’s awful that they put that book on there. Absolutely awful.”

"I'm okay." Remus scrubs his face with a hand. "Honestly, I'm alright. It's... well. I'm not worried about the book, not really. I'm worried about what its inclusion means."

"You think Hogwarts is going to change?"

He nods grimly. "From her letter, I don't think McGonagall is going to be Headmistress for long."

29th August, 1976.

James Potter,

Hope this owl finds you safe. I've been wanting to check in all summer and ended up feeling a little too awkward for it, but hey. Things have changed a little recently.

I'm guessing you're staying with some friends (some magical friends at that) so you know what's going on, or some of it, at least. I considered owling the other Padfoot's Army leaders, too, but I'm already taking a risk with this, and since Lupin and Evans live in muggle-dominated areas, from what I remember, I don't want to draw bad attention their way.

Me and some other graduates have holed up in a flat in London. Most of us have something to risk in this, something that puts us on their shitlist. Lots of halfbloods and muggleborns here, and we've got a girl who's half Veela, too. We're on the run after our little group got discovered the other day and I'm sending out as many letters as I think I can get away with to spread the word: you can't go back to Hogwarts. You can't. Tell everybody you know.

They're locking up muggleborns, not letting them go home, Potter. Flitwick found us to tell us. We're launching a rescue mission to stop the Hogwarts Express on the first, going to try to get some of the firsties off to a safehouse, but it'll be risky. Here we were, thinking it was all going to start and end with the damn pureblood maniac being published on the readings list. Guess that was only the beginning.

Don't try to come out and help us. Wherever you are, stay put and stay safe.

Benjy Macmillan.

(Oh, and, P.S.: I'm sure somebody's told you by now, because word spreads quick, but you can't use magic. Not even when you turn seventeen, not even in the school year. Not unless you're registered. That's what that new law is really about. They're using some modified version of the Trace, we think. They'll find you.)

"Fuck," James says, and plunges a fist into the wall.

It barely makes a dent. Oceanside houses are built sturdy, and thank god for that, Remus supposes, as he stares down at Macmillan's letter, sitting on the kitchen table.

Across from him, Lily is sheet-white, so pale she looks sort of like a ghost. Remus thinks he could walk through her if he wanted to.

"No..." she murmurs. "No, that's..."

Remus reaches out to grab her hand. "They won't get you here. I promise."

"The other students-- somebody has to warn them--" She makes a strangled sound.

"Macmillan and the others are going to help," Remus promises. "And Professor McGonagall, she'll try to stop it, I know she will. She's the decent sort."

Lily wipes her eyes furiously, cheeks wet. Then, without a word, she stands up and rushes out of the room.

"Lily--" James calls after her halfheartedly. He seems to give up after a second, taking his seat again at Remus' side, staring at the letter like it's about to catch fire.

Silence brews between them. Remus doesn't know what to say, doesn't know where to start, even.

"Sirius knew," James whispers.

"What?" Remus asks.

"He knew they would do that thing. With the trace." James' hands twitch in his lap. "Remember I said he snapped my wand? And he told me not to apparate, too. He knew, Remus. He knew they'd do this."

A chill runs down Remus' spine, cold and throbbing. "You... you think?" he asks gently.

James nods. "I'm sure of it. I dunno how, but he knew. Somebody told him, or he... worked it out, somehow."

Andromeda's words ring through Remus' brain unannounced. *Sirius knows how he thinks, too, and that scares Voldemort. And whatever secret he figured out, he did it because he knows how men like the Dark Lord behave.*

"I see," Remus says quietly. "That makes sense."

"None of this makes sense."

Remus links their arms together and James leans on him heavily. They share the same air. "We're safe here," he promises. "We're safe right where we are."

He doesn't share his anxieties, which are numerous; that his father is actually under investigation because somebody's figured out what Remus is, that they're going to know about him and come find him and kill him, that he's going to get James and Lily hurt, which Remus would never forgive himself for, not in a million years.

James either has the same worries, and doesn't need to hear them again, or doesn't, in which case, Remus refuses to be the one who puts them into his head.

In the living room, Lily is silent. Remus suspects she's crying, but giving her space is probably the best option for now.

"How did he know..." James murmurs, almost to himself more than to Remus.

Remus doesn't reply. He doesn't have an answer.

Sirius,

It's four AM, and the Hogwarts Express sets off today, and I can't sleep. Benjy Macmillan (you know him, right? Gryffindor. Sixth year, when you last saw him) owed us to tell us not to try anything, so we're stuck here waiting to hear news on his raid on the train. They're going to rescue

muggleborn firsties, he said. He and the other graduates on the run with him.

Lily's awake, too. I can hear her pacing around in the kitchen. It's not quite light outside yet, but the dawn chorus is just starting. James is still asleep. He kicks in his sleep. I'm one big bruise. You probably knew that already.

September 1st again. Doesn't feel like it should be here already. With the wedding and the ministry takeover and everything, it feels like it should be... less time than it's been. Like it was two minutes ago we were leaving the castle, and Dumbledore was still alive, and everything was the way it should be.

James thinks you knew about the Trace, about the new registration laws, before they happened. Is that true? I hate to think what that would mean.

But the more I think about you, and what happened to you, and what you told me when we last saw each other, the less I like what I think, Sirius. I think this much: you've kept lots and lots and lots of secrets from us over the years, and I think you got very good at it. I don't know what that means for either of us.

Peter got in contact again. Did I tell you? He said he's going to go back to Hogwarts, mother's orders. It'll just be him in the sixth-year Gryffindor boys' dorm. I don't think he's got any idea I'm with James, and he's never been to my house, so we should be safe.

Look at me, suspecting all my friends already. I'm turning into you, Padfoot.

James is waking up, I think. Gonna finish this and try to get him to sleep for a few more hours. I used to be the

worrywart, but if he wakes up, he'll be het-up for hours on end, and I don't want to put up with that today.

Stay safe out there.

Remus.

The first day of September dawns dusty and dry. Remus spends half the morning making bread dough to put in the fridge, ready to bake through the week. Breadmaking is something he's done since he was a kid and he's not about to stop now that the world is ending all around him.

By the time he steps out of the cottage and onto the porch, the sun is blistering down, setting the ocean ablaze. Across the road, Lily and James have climbed the fence into the neighbouring field, occupied by slumbering, sunbathing sheep, around which they weave lazily as they toss a quaffle back and forth between them.

Remus crosses the concrete, folding his arms atop the wooden sty to watch them both for a while. The sun makes it hard to look at them. Even harder than usual.

James' face is strangely imperturbable, like he's thinking very hard. Occasionally, he says something to Lily, too far away to hear. She answers in short sentences, but she smiles more. When James trips over a rock, she laughs at him.

Eventually, sweaty and red-faced, they notice Remus and trek back over to him, James stopping to pet a sheep as he does. She doesn't seem to appreciate it, snapping blunt, square teeth at his hand and scarpering. Remus laughs at his look of disappointment.

“Nothing going on in that head of his,” Lily remarks, shaking her head, as she reaches Remus. “Not a single thing.”

“Trust me,” Remus assures, “I’ve known him long enough to know that about him. For all that he’s a very good friend...”

“No talking shit about me today,” James calls. “I’m stressed. You can’t do that to me.”

“Right.” Remus bites back a smile. “Got it. I’ll bear that in mind.”

Leaning against the fence from the other side, James crosses his arms atop the torn barbed wire, scrunching his face up. “Any news?”

“Nothing. You know the owls find you, not me. They like you more,” Remus says, close to sullen.

“No they don’t, they just think my hair is a nest,” James says shortly.

“When do you think we’ll hear anything?” Lily asks. “You know. About it all.”

“Evening Prophet?” James suggests.

Remus shakes his head. “They won’t talk muggleborn detainment and school train raids in the Prophet. It’ll be Macmillan’s next letter. Tomorrow, maybe? He always did have a soft spot for you, James.”

James makes a face, evidently putting in an effort not to grin. “Ah, shut it. Everybody did. It’s only ‘cause I was a shithead. Everybody loves shithead boys.”

“Except me,” Lily corrects, cleaning under her nail beds.

“Except Lily,” James agrees, cowed. “And myself, now that I’ve grown and matured.”

“I still need convincing,” Lily mutters, hoisting herself over the sty. There’s no heat in it. When Remus catches her eye, she smiles tentatively.

Back in the house, bowls of dough rising in assorted bowls on the kitchen table, they lie on the floor in the living room, the three of them sprawled in a patch of sunlight like sleeping cats. James watches the ceiling, stewing in audible worry. His ribs flex against the yellow sunlight. Lily fiddles with one of Remus’ mother’s handkerchiefs, folding it in and out and in and out again. Remus does and undoes the zipper on James’ sleeve, holding his slender brown hand in his own lap.

There’s nothing much more to do than that. If one of them starts talking, it’ll just get on to the Hogwarts Express, onto Macmillan and the firsties. Better to let it occupy the spaces between them silently than loudly.

On the mantle, the old clock ticks loudly. It was Remus’ mother’s mother’s, when her family lived up in the valleys by the mines. Right now, it feels distinctly like a cawing canary at the bottom of a coal pit.

Suddenly, a tap on the glass window.

All three of them shoot up, James scrambling to his feet to throw open the clasp. A tiny owl flutters inside, black and scrawny, feathers sticking up in all directions, likely from the harsh channel winds. It’s clutching a letter.

James offers his arm, but the owl ignores him, shooting towards Lily instead and landing on her shoulder.

Confused, she unties its letter. It nuzzles her cheek and then totters back off towards the window, zipping out into the pure blue sky.

“Well?” James says, wringing his hands. “Open it.”

“Okay...” Lily murmurs. Remus can’t tell if she’s confused or foreboding. She slits open the top of the letter with her thumbnail and peels it open, then pulls it right up to her face and starts to read.

It takes her some time to get through it. James paces back and forth across the room, in front of the window, shadow blotting the sun in and out. On occasion, he stops to stare out of the window again. Remus just watches Lily, tries to map her expressions, tries to read the colour of her soul through the way she bites her lip.

Eventually, after a painfully long stretch of quiet, Lily sighs heavily and drops down into the armchair in the corner.

“It’s not news,” she says softly.

“Oh,” Remus says.

James sags. He looks like he doesn’t know whether to be relieved or more worried still. “Oh,” he echoes.

“Are you okay?” Remus asks.

Lily certainly doesn’t look very okay. She looks like she hasn’t slept all of a sudden, exhaustion pulling at her.

She glances up at the both of them. "I... well. It's from Severus."

She holds the letter out to Remus. Remus takes it. James crowds in over his shoulder and together, they start to read.

Lily,

I hope my letter finds you safe and well. I wanted to send this before I get on the train, so it'll probably arrive today. I've been trying to build up the nerve to talk to you again after our last fight, but...

Are you coming back for this year? We could patch things up again. I swear it. I know I've been awful but I'm trying to change, to be better for you. I don't want to make you sad or cause you pain and when I realised that's what I'd been doing... it destroyed me. I've been trying really hard. I want to see you again.

I know things will be different at Hogwarts. But honestly, since when was different bad? If anybody tries to hurt you, I'll put a stop to it. Teachers respect me. I can keep you safe. You don't even have to forgive me. Just... talk to me.

I miss you.

Yours,

Severus.

He signs off his letters the same way James signs his. *Yours.* That's the first thing Remus notices, bizarrely enough. Then, the rest of it sinks in.

“Fuck,” James murmurs. He looks like there are a lot of things he desperately wants to say but knows he probably shouldn’t.

Lily nods glumly. She wipes her nose. “Yeah. Yeah, that sums it up.”

“You two fought?”

“At the beginning of fifth,” Lily nods. “Well. After we’d started Padfoot’s Army. He made some comment, and I... I said he was wrong, and we went back and forth for a while...” She trails off, staring out of the window. “We haven’t talked a lot since then. He’s tried to make it up to me a lot. I don’t know that I’m ready for that.”

James nods. He sits down on the sofa facing her. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. It was his fault, not yours.”

“Was it about Sirius? The thing he said.”

Lily laughs slightly. “No. No, it was... it was about you, actually, James.”

James looks mildly stricken. “What did he say?”

She sniffs. “That you were... that you would always be a bad person. That you were born for it. And I, I can’t stand anybody saying anything about birth. About being born predestined to something. So I told him off and he got mean. And I got mean. And then he brought up Sirius, yes, and that was sort of the last straw.”

Remus feels boneless. He sits down beside James. “You didn’t have to...”

"I know. I wanted to." Lily scrubs a hand through her short hair. "He wants me quite desperately to be something I'm never going to be. The sooner he realises he can't have me, the better."

"I'm sorry," James mumbles.

"Don't be. I'm happier now." She reconsiders. "Not happier. Less happy. But more whole."

"Right."

"I'm okay."

James forces a smile. He's bad at fake smiles, terrible at them. All the same, nobody comments on it, because if there's one thing Remus is bad at, it's telling James when he's done something wrong.

No owl arrives. The evening Prophet doesn't report anything new about Hogwarts, not outside of a footnote about the new DADA professor on one of the back pages. Some German pureblood. Nobody who's ever personally advocated against Remus' rights, so he doesn't recognise the name.

James doesn't sleep that night, just sits up next to Remus in the bed, worrying at his nails with his teeth and getting up occasionally to pace. He writes an extraordinarily long letter to Sirius at around three in the morning, six or seven pages long, the longest Remus has ever seen him write. Remus pretends to doze, mostly just so he doesn't have to correct the closeness between them. When James finally settles down to lie beside him, sunlight is peeking through the window. They sleep then, the both of them.

“Nothing, still,” Lily tells them miserably when they pile down the stairs at eleven that morning. “No owls, nothing in the Prophet. They’re showing Sirius’ wanted poster again, though. No new information,” she fills in, seeing James and Remus both jolt with tension at that. “I checked.”

“Of course,” Remus mutters, shuffling towards the kitchen table. “James, sit, please; if you pace much more you’ll wear through the floor.”

“Sorry,” James mutters. He sits beside Remus and wordlessly, Lily puts more crusty sourdough bread in the toaster.

“I thought I heard movement in the night,” Lily remarks. “Outside of Hope coming home, I mean. She’s already left, by the way.”

“Figured.” Remus rests his forehead on the table. “Yeah, James has been up all night.”

“Moony,” James says reproachfully. “I thought you were asleep? You pretended to be asleep.”

“I pretend lots of things,” Remus says fairly. “But, sorry. I was awake for most of it.”

“It’s fine.” James shrugs. “It’s just because you love my company.”

“Of course. Nothing I love more.” It’s only half a joke.

James Potter,

You're on his list of people to contact if it went to shit. James Potter the sixth year, right? Well, not really. Guess you didn't go back this year. The Padfoot's Army guy. Friends with Black.

Okay, I'm writing lots of these, so I don't have lots of time to personalise. Macmillan's dead. Killing curse from a death eater halfway into the raid. No helping him now. He died fighting, though, so I'm sure he would have been proud. We got a handful of kids off, but not enough. They're in a safer place, for now.

Hogwarts is danger zone prime. No matter what you hear, no matter what, don't go back. Spread the word. Keep everybody you can out of there. If somebody you know has gone back, don't trust them. They're on enemy territory now.

44218FM, Tuesday night, 8-ish. Password is 'Benjy'.

- Your friends in London.

The letter arrives on the following night. After James reads it, he shuffles horizontally onto the sofa and wraps his arms around his stomach and doesn't speak to either of them for hours. Remus and Lily sit at the kitchen table, watching the ocean.

"I didn't know him," Remus murmurs. "Not very well, anyway."

"I'd spoken to him," Lily says. "He wanted to help first-years and the like with bad families. Wanted to offer them alternatives. Good guy, I think."

"James it cut up about it."

"I don't think he knew him very well either." Lily sighs. "I just don't think he can take much more heartbreak."

Remus hesitates. "Your family."

"No contact." Lily folds her arms around herself like she might fall apart. "I made them promise. Almost obliterated them, but with the risk of the Trace... and they swore to me they'd do everything I told them to. So."

"Do you miss them?"

She shakes her head. "My sister hates me," she says flatly. "That's how Sev-- *Snape* and I met when we were kids. She didn't like me for the things I could do. I was younger than her, didn't get what I had done wrong. He was... a respite. Showed me a world outside of the little midlands town I'd grown up in. We were close."

"You were for a few years after you started Hogwarts," Remus says gently. "I remember."

Lily scoffs, lowering her voice. "Between you and I," she says, "Don't say this to him. Not today. But James'... everything... for the first few years... it really got on top of me. Hard not to feel like you're being mocked when somebody like him fixates on you, not when you're used to being made fun of and singled out and othered. Severus hated James. It felt like chivalry."

Remus notices the word choice. "But it wasn't."

Lily shakes her head. "The world is more complicated than it was when I was twelve. I've learned a lot since then."

"Like?"

"Bigotry isn't about whether you're a nice person or not," Lily says immediately. "It's about whether you think people are worth what you're worth. Plenty of nice people don't understand worth. Their own or others'."

"I can stand behind that," Remus agrees.

"I'm going to spend my life fighting to be accepted."

He winces. "Certainly."

Lily sighs. "And even James Potter has the capacity for change, with just the right amount of..."

She trails off. The unspoken word hangs on the air between them. *Suffering*.

"Not sure I agree on that one," Remus murmurs. "Well. Maybe I do. But I'm tired of watching my friend suffer. I'd take a mean James over a hurt one every day for the rest of my life."

Lily's doleful green eyes wander up his face. After a second, she glances out towards the ocean. "All three of us won't survive this," she sighs. "Just statistically. Wizarding wars aren't like muggle plagues. Their death counts are higher."

Remus crosses and uncrosses his fingers in his lap. "Maybe you're right."

"What do you want to do with your life?" she asks. "If you live."

"I don't know," Remus sighs. "Something with a happy ending."

Kissing doesn't fix everything, especially not when you're lovesick teenagers whose best friend is on the run from a murderous fascist dictator groomer, and your school friends are dying, and your home is under siege and you can't return to it, but Remus kisses James that night, long and slow. James kisses him back, perhaps out of sympathy, lips hot and chapped like they always are. They lie like that for a long time, on Remus' tiny camp bed, waning moonlight streaming in over them from the open window. James' neck flexes under the dull light. Remus watches it and wonders what it would be like to be somebody else.

"I'm going to go to London," James murmurs. "After we listen to that broadcast on Tuesday. Find Macmillan's people. Talk to them."

Remus grabs his hand, trying to drag him back in. James obliges and their lips touch and they sink together, breathy and weak, but only for a few stolen moments.

"I mean it," James insists, pulling away.

Holding the hand against his chest as if he can keep it, Remus watches him from the other side of the pillow. "How will you find them?"

"Somehow." James shakes his head. "I'll arrange a meeting. They'll recognise me."

"And if they kill you? The death eaters?"

James squares his jaw. "I can't keep waiting for the war to come to us, Remus."

"Wait for a little longer. Until we're of age."

“What difference will it make? We’ll still have the trace on us.”

“James,” Remus groans, low in the back of his throat like a growl. “James, not tonight. I can’t think about you dying tonight. Please. Tomorrow. I can’t think about this now.”

“And I can’t stop thinking about him.”

A knife between the ribs. Of course. “I know,” Remus murmurs. “I know.”

Eventually, James falls asleep. Remus wonders, for a while, if he’s going to spend the rest of his life jumping between being jealous of Lily and Sirius and anybody else James falls in love with. But that sort of self-pitying talk doesn’t help anybody, so he cuts it out.

Soon, however, darker thoughts sweep in to take their place, bitter enough to make Remus wish for jealousy. Macmillan, dead. Not even a year out of Hogwarts. Dead. This is a war, and they’ve all known it for some time now, but wars have casualties. Remus hadn’t realised that properly before, not even when they lost Sirius and everybody went around acting like he’d died.

Benjy Macmillan, the one who asked if Sirius was being hurt at home. Benjy Macmillan, with an amicable smile and an ordinary sort of temperament. Nothing remarkable about him. That almost makes it worse.

Because when Sirius disappeared, some small part of it had felt like destiny.

This just feels like a mistake.

As he falls asleep, Remus wonders if he would have even made it onto the Hogwarts Express, being what he is. They probably would have kidnapped him right off the platform.

Sirius,

Benjy Macmillan's dead. The Hogwarts term has started. No news in the Prophet about that. It's... strange. Being in this house while school goes on. Like we're kids skipping class. Even though McGonagall told us to give the year a miss herself, and she's headmistress, it still feels mildly illicit.

James and Lily have gone off for a walk to the shops together. We're out of fruit and tea. It's too quiet in here. I almost went with them, but I've got mid-moon-cycle blues, and I think I'd just bring the tone down (if it could go any lower, after yesterday's news), so I'm staying in the house. They could do with a chat, anyway. I think they're finally starting to understand one another.

In quiet moments like this, I often imagine what you're doing. James thinks it's cool stuff. Running from muggle police and dipping and diving around cars on the motorway on a bike, one of those electric ones that whirrs. I always imagine the worst. Guess it's in my nature. In my mind you're starving in some cave somewhere. Suppose that it's sort of something in the middle of those two, right? I hope so, anyway. Safe and tucked away, I hope you are. And who am I kidding. You're you. Of course you're making stupid decisions.

I say that like we even know each other anymore. Sometimes I feel like we don't. That hurts, Sirius. The thought that we might have forgotten things about each

other, or changed too much to go back. It's horrible. Makes me feel out of time and out of control and like the world is moving too quick for me. I half expect to see you again and have you just be... more than me. More than you were and more than I am.

I should stop complaining. You've got lots more to complain about than me. It really is lovely out here. You've never been to Wales, right? I'll take you here someday.

Stay safe out there,

Remus.

On Tuesday night, Lily sitting imperiously over a huge spread of potions ingredients on the kitchen, sorting her meagre stores and re-embalming some bottles, the sun sets over them all a little earlier. Autumn has swept in bright and cold. Remus' favourite season. He tells himself that bodes well as he and James set up the crackly little portable radio on the kitchen counter.

"44218FM," James recites dutifully, as Remus twiddles the little dial on top of the radio. "Four-four. Two-one. Eight. Eff em."

"Thanks," Remus murmurs. Then, "Okay, and the password?"

"Benjy. With a 'y'."

"Thanks." Remus glances down at the browning pamphlet on the kitchen counter on morse code. Hesitantly, he raises his wand and starts tapping out the pattern of Benjy's name. They all hold their breath for a moment.

No aurors or death eaters (perhaps closer to the same thing than ever before) arrive.

“Phew,” James says. “Guess that doesn’t count as a spell.”

“Guess not.” Remus concentrates, trying to get each letter right. By the time he’s done, James has sat down opposite Lily and is poking at one of her ingredient vials interestedly.

“Hands off,” Lily commands him. She sighs, standing up and starting the long process of transferring each tiny glass bottle back into her potionmaking case. “You can have the chair in a sec, Remus, sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Remus leans against the counter and listens to the dull static of the radio. No broadcast yet.

“I’ll help,” James offers, springing to his feet. “No, honest, I can lend a hand!”

Lily rolls her eyes fondly and pushes a set of steel stirrers at him. “Arrange them by thickness,” she instructs. “In that metal pouch there.”

James grins at her. “On it, boss.”

Remus’ heart prickles. He looks away.

Lily has barely closed the clasp on her kit with a sharp click when the radio whirrs to life. A young woman’s voice rings through and all three of them jump.

“Welcome,” she says, tentatively, like she’s testing her microphone, “To the first weekly broadcast of *Direct Action*, your number one source on all things magical Britain that the Prophet doesn’t want you to hear about. Gather ‘round,

friends -- we've got a lot to cover this week, and not much time 'til the death eaters find us, probably..."

"Oh, lighten up," a male voice says, significantly brighter than hers. Remus recognises both of them, he thinks, though not well. Hufflepuffs who graduated last year. He thinks he used to have prefect meetings with them, once upon a time. "I'm sure we'll do just fine, Gambit. *Vive la révolution!* We've done quite well in keeping out of their pocket so far, anyway. Suppose they're too busy writing articles trying to convince the public Bellatrix Black isn't a convicted muggle-torturer."

Remus grabs the radio and puts it down in the middle of the kitchen table, sitting down quickly. James and Lily lean in on either side of him.

"Suppose you're right about that." Sounding reinvigorated, Gambit clears her throat and presses on. "I'm your host, Gambit, and here with me tonight is my co-host, Lyric--"

"That's me," the male voice says cheekily. "Hi, friends!"

"And a guest of honor to be revealed in due time. Since our list of contacts is short and getting shorter, we haven't been able to get the word out on these broadcasts very well yet," Gambit carries on, "But we've got faith that you, our trusty audience, can get our voices heard. Spread the message! Keep the spirit of rebellion alive. Now that that's over with, let's get into the news."

James reaches over to squeeze Remus' hand very tight.

"First," Gambit says, "I'm going to pass it over to Lyric for some bad-news-first, so we can end on a high note later. Lyric, if you will."

Lyric sighs. "It's my deepest regret to be the one to inform you all of the deaths in our community that haven't quite made mainstream news this week. Benjy Macmillan, Alder Beaverdam and an unnamed Hogwarts first-year were killed late last week in a raid on the Hogwarts Express. While a dozen muggleborn first-years have been rescued and moved to a safe place, the loss of a doubtlessly wonderful student, as well as two brave graduates, hurts us all."

Lily's hand rises to her mouth. Her horror-wide eyes stay fixed on the radio.

"This raid came as a result of new measures at Hogwarts to detain and harm muggleborn students," Gambit fills in, sounding less optimistic now. "While the valiant work of the Friends of London has saved over ten young lives, each loss still deserves honor and respect, so raise your glasses tonight for our three dead."

Two graduates and an eleven year-old. Remus wants to be sick. By the looks of James' taut face and Lily's sheet-white complexion, they feel the same way. The world seems to close in around them and get a whole lot more claustrophobic.

"Thank you," Lyric murmurs. "In addition, we've had word that Arif Sikander, muggle studies professor at Hogwarts, has been found dead in a ravine in the highlands. He's been missing for two weeks now." A heavy sigh. "Luckily, it's been determined that Sikander didn't suffer long, and it was a quick death. His replacement is, as of yet, unknown."

"As for our other missing persons," Gambit puts in, "The list is still supremely long, folks. Standouts include groundskeeper Rubeus Hagrid--"

"No!" all three of them shout, James jumping up out of his chair and sending it screeching backwards.

--Ministry workers Harley Wolpers, Franky Kelpis and Ali Arbutus," Gambit pushes on, "Abeforth Dumbledore, Caradoc Dearborn, Gideon Prewett, Aster Fourpetal, Regulus Black, Glenn Pugs and Micah Hearth."

"And our eponymous Sirius Black," Lyric says. Remus' heart soars from its place in the pit of his stomach. "The undesirable number one still hasn't been seen, nor heard from, since his reported disappearance during summer, 1975, almost a year and a half ago now. However, since our favourite loon seems desperate to find him, and you can scarcely open a paper without seeing his rather handsome face, I think we can take for certain that the kid's on the run."

"Whatever he did to piss you-know-who off," Gambit agrees, "It must have been quite something. If anybody has any information on any of these people's whereabouts, health or, uh, status of alive-ness, get in touch. That includes the Black brothers. Both are still underage. I'm sure their parents would be desperate to have them home."

James and Remus exchange eye-rolls.

"Certainly," Lyric agrees amicably. "And now that we've got the dark and dreary over with, it's my utmost pleasure to welcome on our wonderful guest speaker. Walker, if you'd like to introduce yourself...?"

"I'm Walker, to all of you. It's good to be here," the speaker, Walker, says pleasantly.

James' chair, which he's only just sat back down in, is promptly vacated again as he springs to his feet. "That's Shackbolt!" he yelps. "One of Dumbledore's guys! I met him at the wedding!"

Remus pulls him back down gently. "Listen," he urges.

"We're glad to have you," Gambit says warmly. "Tell us a little about your work?"

"Well," Shackbolt says, "I can't say much, but I'm working alongside an underground group based in London -- that's a separate one from the Friends of London, who have graciously invited me onto their show--"

"No problem," Lyric laughs.

"We're less focused on outreach on my end," Shackbolt says, "And more in tracking down and incapacitating you-know-who's most powerful. We can't tell you who's commissioned us, but we're mostly resigned aurors and the like."

"Powerful folks, then?"

"Very," Shackbolt agrees. "Right now, the most important thing we can tell the public is that if you're not registered, *do not* use magic to any capacity. Potionmaking is fine, so long as it doesn't rely on wand magic, and long-term charmed objects like brooms don't set off the Trace, but if you use any incantations, even anything wordless, the Ministry will know your location immediately and it'll put them on your map. And yes, it includes apparition."

"Nasty stuff," Gambit says. "We got well acquainted with that a while ago. Thanks, to the death eater who took a chunk out of my arm. I'll be getting you back for that."

"The auror force has been taken over by death eaters and death eater sympathisers," Shacklebolt continues, "And if you're unregistered and you use magic, they'll be the ones facing you down and asking why you aren't registered yet, so drill it into your head: no magic, not unless you have absolutely no other choice."

"Do you and your people think that was the intention of this act, then?" Gambit asks. "To isolate and neutralise freedom fighters, so they can't defend themselves?"

"To an extent," Shacklebolt agrees. "The wizarding registry can be changed at any time, and names taken off, so it also guarantees that you-know-who can track down any defectors. And most importantly, it lets them decide who can and can't live in the wizarding world. We've already caught wind of various half-breeds being denied registry--"

Remus' stomach goes cold. *Of course. You expected this.*

"--And muggleborns, of course, too. Halfbloods have, for the most part, gotten a pass, though that might be due to change in the imminent future, so if you're an unregistered halfblood, get out there and get your name on their papers."

"It's barbaric," Lyric murmurs. "Outside of specifically anti-Dark Lord spheres such as the ones we move in, Walker, has there been much protest to this new registration regime?"

"Not that I've heard of," Shacklebolt says forebodingly. "For most families, it's a trip to the ministry and then away-we-go, I suppose. Doesn't change their lives much."

"And for empathy?"

“Not much of that to spare these days,” Shacklebolt says.

“Aye to that,” Gambit agrees. “Let’s hope we can stir up a little more of it with *Direct Action*.”

“I’ve the most faith that you can,” Shacklebolt encourages.

“Thank you, Walker,” Gambit says. “With that, we’ll need to bring tonight’s show to an end soon, but did you have anything you wanted to say to anybody out there who might be on the run? Losing family, losing their homes? Lord knows there’s lots of that about right now.”

“Sure,” Shacklebolt says. His voice goes hard and serious. “Keep your loved ones close and don’t trust anybody you don’t know for sure is on your side. Remember that complicity is violence, in this case, and being neutral on this war, trying not to take sides, will get innocent people killed. Trust your instincts. Resist the power. Remember empathy.”

“That’s the spirit,” Lyric encourages.

“And to the undesirable number one,” Shacklebolt continues. “We’re looking for you. You’re a brave kid, from what we know, so no doubt you’re keeping yourself alive just fine, but remember that you’re not alone.”

“Wise words from Walker there,” Gambit concludes. “Thank you again, mate, for coming on to talk to us. It was great to have you. We’re rounding this week to a close now, but keep your heads up, take care of one another, and remember -- your brothers and sisters are not your enemy, don’t treat them like they are. Goodnight, folks! Next week’s password is ‘Regulus’.”

Sirius,

TWO resistance groups in London. TWO! One of them is called the 'Friends of London', a group of graduates and muggleborns hiding out from the registry. They've started a radio show, it's called 'Direct Action' and it's wonderful, Sirius, and I hope you're listening to it, wherever you are, because they talked about you, they wished you luck, told you they're going to find you, how amazing is that?

It wasn't all good news. Your brother's still missing (still at Durmstrang, I suppose) and so is Hagrid, and some others. But I think it really lifted all of our spirits, to have that connection to the resistance. James wants to go running off to London right now. I've managed to convince him to stay here until the next full moon, and after that, we can... make some decisions, I suppose.

They had a guest speaker on -- Kingsley Shacklebolt! Apparently he's working for another group, a commission of retired aurors and the like working on hunting and killing death eaters. How amazing is that? James reckons McGonagall is behind it. I think it's probably more likely to be Alastor Moody. My dad told me that guy's crazy.

I can't write for long. The three of us are still talking over theories and such. I'm just so... so much less alone, it feels like, now. It all feels more real, but it feels less like it's just me fighting this war on my own, y'know?

Stay safe out there. One of these days, we're going to find you.

Remus.

Two nights later, Remus' dad comes home.

James and Lily are already asleep, both of them hogging Remus' single bed up in his room after they fell asleep there talking, and Remus has resigned himself to sleeping on the sofa in the living room when he hears the key in the lock and his dad steps inside, mum right behind him, both of them sallow-faced and tired.

"Dad," Remus says breathlessly, jumping up from the sofa. He runs to him and gives him a hug. "You're okay?"

Dad hugs him back gently. "I'm alright," he says, not sounding it. "Been lodging at the ministry for the past few weeks to keep them from following me home. They don't know..." He trails off. "Well. I'm keeping my job."

"What's going on?"

Dad sighs. He sits Remus down on the sofa and kneels in front of him. "Your mother," he says tentatively, "Is going to be... staying with family for a little while. In North Wales. Okay?"

"Why?" Remus asks.

"Because if my colleagues find out I've married a muggle..." Dad shakes his head. "I don't want either of you in danger, so that's just how it's going to be, I suppose."

"Okay," Remus says, confused and overwhelmed.

Behind dad, mum's face is teary, eyes red and puffy. When Remus catches her gaze, she looks away.

"Thankfully," Dad carries on, "They don't know about you, yet, either, so..."

"So?" Remus asks.

Dad's eyes flicker away from his face like he can't look at Remus. "So," he says gently, "I think it'd be best if you stayed with a friend elsewhere for a while. Just until all this calms down."

"What?" Remus asks, uncomprehendingly.

"Remus, please don't make this harder than it needs to be--"

Mum lets out a strangled sob. "John, if anybody's making this hard--"

He whirls around to face her. "If I lose my job, they'll snap my wand, they'll take me off the register!"

"Are me and your son not worth your magic?!" mum shouts back at him. "I thought we mattered to you!"

"This won't be forever-- it's just for a while--"

But Remus is on his feet now, too. "They won't follow you home, dad. You could... you could *fidelius* the place. You could do something. Anything." *Don't make me leave*, he doesn't say out loud. *Please don't make me leave*.

"I'm sorry, but there's no other way--"

Mum rakes a hand through her tangled blonde hair, tears streaming down her cheeks. Then, without a word, she storms back outside, slamming the door behind her.

"Hope!" John calls after her, getting up and hurrying out behind her and leaving Remus alone in the middle of the living room, swaying on his feet as the waves crash distantly outside. As the sounds of his home swell around him, he

feels more alone, more weightless, than he's ever felt in his life.

Shell-shocked, Remus pulls himself together and pads to the stairs, which wind up to the floor above. Around the corner, James and Lily are sitting side-by-side on the top step, looking down at him, their dimly lit faces bright with concern.

"We're going to London," Remus says, after a moment. "Dad wants us out of here, as soon as we can be, I think. We should pack."

"Remus..." James says, then seems to realise he's got nothing much he can say at all. "Are you alright?"

"Tired," Remus admits. "Really tired."

"We can come back here," Lily offers. "Find a new place. Once things have..."

But things won't. Not for a long time. And all of them know it.

Remus shakes his head. "Come on. We should get our stuff. The sooner we're out of his hair, the better."

"Right." James reaches out to hug him right, the both of them half-sitting against the top step. "You've got us, Moony."

"I know." Remus doesn't hug back. "Come on. I don't want to... come on."

James obeys. Lily squeezes Remus' arm on her way past him to the living room, to pack up her own stuff. Remus wonders if London is going to feel haunted to James, too.

Chapter End Notes

- [Official Tumblr](#)
- [Twitter Quotes Bot](#) (admin: [lupinlesbian](#))
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LONDON

Chapter Notes

got the most wonderful comment on the last chapter and i'm still buzzing about it. you guys are lovely. <3

tw: violence, homophobic language, brief discussion of violence against women

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Remus doesn't speak as they board the train from the grey little town of Bridgend to Paddington Station, London. Their small trio shuffles into their economy-class seats, the compartment grimy and plastic-smelling, Lily opposite the both of them, and Remus stares out of the window as ghostly, green Wales flashes by. James watches him unabashedly. Lily stares down at the table like she's trying to read its thoughts. None of them speak.

James has known for a while that Remus has a strained relationship with his father. Remus isn't a good liar, and he doesn't make an effort to lie often, not unless he feels like he has to, which is rare. Still. This feels a little too extreme to just call 'strained'. He can still hear Hope Lupin's crying ringing in his ears.

Where they're going to sleep tonight, James has no idea. A muggle hotel, probably. He can pay for it, and if Lily or Remus have complaints about that, well, they can pay him back someday, when things are easier. Each of them has two heavy bags, stuffed with clothes and books and such. James only has one. Most of his stuff was destroyed with his parents what feels like a million years ago. At least he

knows Remus will always be willing to share clothes with him.

The Remus in question rests his head against the glass window and closes his eyes. Lily hooks an ankle around James' under the table.

"Alright?" she asks quietly.

"Yeah," James tells her, like he's sure of it, like he's sure of anything. "Yeah, I'm okay."

They play multiple games of noughts and crosses on the back page of her notebook, passing Lily's biro pen back and forth between them and filling the lined paper with messy hatches and lazy circles. Lily wins most of them, strategic as she is, and James doesn't even care about it, really. Remus falls asleep.

An hour passes. The tunnel under the river dividing England and Wales is long, darkness consuming the windows, and the flickering overhead light in the compartment makes faint shadows dance across the grey-brown walls. Outside, James imagines he can see strange shadows, odd figures, just out of view, just out of place. Beyond the glass and watching them all.

"I'm going to try to owl the Friends of London," James tells Lily, as the train emerges onto the overground, grubby grey England rising high over them. They're approaching a small track-side town, corrugated iron shacks pressed tight against the National Rail fence.

Lily looks up from her notebook, where she's been doodling a hoard of eyes peering out from the corner of the page. "You're sure that's a good idea?"

“It’s about the only option we’ve got.”

“I’ll give you that,” she agrees, biting her lip. “I’d like to know more about Shacklebolt and his people. I think it’d help us.”

“Agreed,” James says. “But something tells me...”

“The Friends of London would be easier to find.” Lily cracks a smile. “I know. They don’t seem overly professional.”

“They’re only two years older than us. And we’ve hardly been professional.”

“Despite my best efforts,” Lily assents mournfully.

“ *Direct Action* was wonderful, though.”

“Wonderful and terrible,” she agrees. “Which just about most things are nowadays. The bit about Sirius, I can’t stop thinking about it.”

Better that than thinking about the dead muggleborn kid.
“Me, too.”

“It hadn’t occurred to me that he might... represent something. Being undesirable number one and everything. But I guess it makes sense. Hogwarts student does a vanishing act, prompts the founding of an underground fighting club among students. A year later, he’s in the papers with a reward on his head so high it could start its own Noble and Ancient house. I get why it intrigues people.”

“It’s weird,” James murmurs. “Watching people who didn’t know him talk about him.”

"I think it's a good thing."

"You do?"

Lily nods. "More leads. Something to rally around. Plus from what I remember about Black, I think he'd appreciate the attention."

James laughs at that. "Only because his childhood was tragically deprived."

"Right, of course. How could I forget?"

"The being-given-over-to-the-dark-lord's-custody-by-parents should have tipped you off."

"Honestly, the lives some of you wizarding folks live." Lily rests her head back against the seat, grinning. "Far too much excitement for me."

James fights back a broad smile. The guilt is still there (he thinks all of them will be feeling it for quite some time), but it's nice to laugh about this stuff, too. The last week has been pretty deprived of laughter, what with Macmillan's death, the *Direct Action* broadcast, and Remus' awful father.

Exciting lives indeed.

Pads,

Don't have much space. Lily has offered me one (1) page of her notebook to write you a letter on. She's humming some Beatles song opposite me, one of the cool ones from their experimental album. I just asked if she's got anything to tell you and she said hi.

We're on the train from Wales to London. Remus' dad kicked us out. He's afraid if the Ministry finds out his son is a halfblood werewolf, he'll lose his job. Remus is pretty cut up about it. He loves South Wales. He's asleep right now, next to me.

We've still heard nothing more about you. What am I even saying that for anymore. I last wrote to you less than twenty-four hours ago. Of course there's nothing new. Still feels grounding to say it, though. Just in case you were wondering.

Is America nice? I swear I've told Remus a dozen times that's where you'd go. It's huge, bloody massive, and it's full of people, too. You could hide well there. Don't think you could fake the accent super well, but hey, you'd give it a good effort, right? I bet it's sunny over there this time of year, not grey and dewy like it is in over the pond.

I'm running out of space. The box I keep your letters in is at the very, very bottom of my bag. I'll just keep this one in my jacket for now, I guess.

I love you. Even now I'm thinking about you all the time.

Yours,

Prongs.

That night, the three of them book a few nights' stay in a Hilton holiday hotel on the outskirts of inner London city, an hour's walk from King's Cross. They get a room with a double bed and a twin, and the lady at the reception desk jokes about Remus third-wheeling with James and Lily, and none of them correct her. Remus gets a sour sort of look about him, though.

That might just be the general situation, though. After all, he's looked sour all day, since they got off the train at Paddington Station and wandered out into the bustling city, the three of them standing on the curb and staring out over the crowds with the sudden, swooping feeling (like nausea when you go over a sharp bump in the road) that the world was very large and they were very small.

They wandered around for a while, as if expecting to stumble on the Friends of London headquarters somewhere, like it would pop out of the ground in front of them. Eventually, Lily had the sense to suggest they get a hotel room to drop off their stuff and rest for a bit, and James and Remus readily agreed.

Now, Remus sits in the tiny armchair by the window, looking out through the grubby glass at the city, and wordlessly, James unpacks both of their stuff into the same drawer. Lily takes the wardrobe. No words are needed.

"I forgot a toothbrush," James says absently, at one point.

"There's a Tesco Extra down the road," Lily replies promptly. "We'll stop there tonight. We need food, too."

"I've got money."

She smiles with teeth. "I wanted to talk to you about that, actually. But... it can wait."

"Looking for my grand fortune, are you?" James jokes.

"Oh, you know me," Lily replies. "I've been after you for years."

They laugh together at the private, illicit joke. It feels nice, sort of, to mock who James used to be. Far nicer than the

idea of mocking anybody else, anyway. At the window, Remus actually smiles -- a tiny thing, but it's there. What a win.

After some time, he sighs, turning over his shoulder to watch Lily and James morosely. "I can help unpack?" he offers.

"Nah," James says. "You can keep sitting there."

"Okay," Remus agrees gently.

"When's the next full?"

"A week and a half away." Remus yawns, not visibly stricken at the idea. "We'll have to take the train a ways out. Somewhere rural."

They've discovered over the past month or two that now, even without Padfoot, James is pretty good at taming the wolf. Maybe just because his animagus form is so big. Maybe it's because they trust each other a little more now. Either way, moons have been usually relatively peaceful this summer. It's a weight off Remus' shoulders. Anything to make him less stressed, James rationalises with himself each time. It doesn't matter if he gets hurt.

Across the room, Lily eyes the both of them. She's known for some time about Remus, since the first weeks of Padfoot's Army. She doesn't know about James.

"You want me to come with you?" she offers. Presumably because she thinks James won't be out there with Remus all night.

"Nah," James says quickly. "Nah. It's better if you, uh. Guard the castle. Hold down the... fort? Muggle sayings."

“Hold down the fort was right,” Lily agrees. She sounds vaguely dubious, but willing to accept it. “And, okay. We can do that.”

She doesn’t ask anymore questions, thankfully. James crosses the room to fuck up Remus’ hair with his knuckles, and Remus only half fights him off. It’s nice. Nice, in the hailstorm of awful that has consumed the rest of their lives.

“Your breath stinks,” Remus tells him halfheartedly. “You really do need that toothbrush.”

“You love it, though.”

A faint smile. “Of course.”

Bullet follows them to London. James has long-since lost his cage, but he finds them anyway, tapping on the window of the Hilton hotel room a few hours after they arrive. James lets him in.

Unsurprisingly, addressing a letter to ‘The Friends Of London’ doesn’t get him anywhere. Bullet returns after an hour with the letter still tied to his leg, looking confused in an owlsh way. Lily whaps James over the head and suggests the three of them go down to the Tesco Extra to get essentials, and sleep on the problem with full stomachs, and try again tomorrow.

James agrees. Lily makes a shopping list and Remus comments halfheartedly that he’s a vegetarian. It makes her laugh.

By dusk, this area of London is quieter, less hectic with tourists and shoppers. James, dwarfed in one of Remus’

muggle sweatshirts, balances along the curb in his sneakers as Remus and Lily talk about the new season of some muggle reality show he's never heard of. Neither of them has watched it in years, but evidently, they've both got strong opinions. Nearby, a gaggle of teenagers smoke weed atop the awning of a boarded-up shop. James grins at them and one of them waves their blunt at him, smirking.

The Tesco Extra is mostly empty, but for a pair of employees chatting by the register. They eye James as he comes in, and mildly spooked, he follows Remus and Lily down the cereal and snack aisle as they argue about whether to get bran flakes or shreddies.

"They're basically the same thing," Remus reasons. "Bran flakes are just cheaper."

"Yeah, but shreddies are more filling," Lily counters.

"How are they more filling? It's bran. It's meant to be filling. They're made of the same stuff..."

As they bicker, James picks up and examines a box of caramel wafers. "Can we get these?"

Remus glances over. "You like them?"

"Never tried them," James admits.

"You're paying, so sure," Lily shrugs. "We need shampoo, too. And hand sanitiser. And we could probably do with a can of air freshener, the hotel room smells..."

By the time they've stocked up on food and everything else, their shopping basket is overflowing. James pays for it all in the little muggle cash he has left, and makes a comment about having to get more money from Gringotts that makes

Lily frown, and then the three of them wander back out onto the street, James carrying both of their heavy red Tesco bags dangling at either side of him, fingers stinging under the plastic handles.

The hot, swelling smell of the city -- gas smoke, herb, concrete, dust, tobacco -- hits him on the way out of the door, and James has to stop for a second. It smells so intensely like Sirius that it almost bowls him over.

Maybe, James thinks, as he jogs to catch up with Lily and Remus, who have already streaked off down the street ahead of him, talking animatedly about some experimental new potion they've both heard about, this place will have just as many ghosts as Wales.

Friends of London,

My name's James Potter, and I think a few of you know me. I was friends with Macmillan. Me and some others started Padfoot's Army last year. We're close friends of Sirius Black.

We want to arrange a meeting, if that's alright. It's just me and the two other ex-leaders of PA. We're on the run. The death eaters murdered my family last year, and we're a blood traitor, a muggleborn and a halfblood, so you can imagine we can't exactly go back to school.

Don't know how we're going to get this letter to you, but if you're reading this, then presume we found a way. Owl us back at room 711, Hilton, Midney Road, London.

Yours,

James Potter.

It's Remus who figures it out. Lily's just turned the light off, and the three of them are settling in to sleep on their second night in London, James and Remus sharing the double bed and Lily tucked into the twin, when he shoots upright in bed and says, "I've got it!"

"What?" James asks groggily.

"Turn the light on, somebody." Remus fumbles his way out of the sheets, and in the dark, James sees him sweep his overlong hair out of his eyes. "Come on, quick--"

Lily flicks on the yellowish light. Blinded for a moment, James blinks away the darkness and watches Remus rush towards the table against the wall, snatching up his letter to the Friends of London.

"I've got it," Remus murmurs, staring down at the crinkled paper. "We have to make them reach out to us, first. Then we keep their owl, and..."

"How?" Lily asks, one part annoyed, one part curious. "How are we supposed to do that?"

Remus turns around to look between them both, light eyes wide like moons. "A demonstration," he says.

James remembers it, then. The riot that made the papers, about that awful DADA textbook. "Something to get their attention," he says, catching on.

Lily sits up fully in bed. "We can't exactly go hoisting signs around the Ministry entrance hall," she says dubiously.

Remus shakes his head. "No. No, not a protest. Not exactly. Let me think."

He staggers across the room to the window chair, looking out over nighttime London. A collection of oddly-shaped, oddly-sized stars, spattered like paint on a brownish black canvas. James and Lily exchange curious looks.

“Something that’ll get back to them,” Remus mutters to himself. “It wouldn’t make the papers, but... word travels fast. That’s what Macmillan’s letter said. News travels fast. Right, Prongs?”

“Right,” James says. “What are you thinking?”

“We’d have to find a way into the Ministry. After hours.”

“It might be possible,” James says, already thinking it over in his head.

“We wouldn’t be able to,” Lily says immediately. “Not without magic.”

But Remus shakes his head. “It wouldn’t be easy. But...”

“Tell us what you’re thinking,” James says again. He climbs out of bed and moves to crouch in front of Remus, trying to meet his eyes. “What’s going on in there?”

Remus shoots him a discomfited smile. Then, he looks at Lily. “We’ll need muggle clothes,” he says. “Trashy ones.”

“Trashy?”

“Stuff you might wear to a party.” Remus clears his throat. “And a weapon. Weapons, plural.” He gets up and starts to pace. “Hair dye. Yeah. Hair dye. James, how well can you see without your glasses?”

James blinks. “Uh. Absolutely shit, honestly.”

“Okay. Okay, we’ll still figure something out,” Remus promises, more to himself than either of them. “And we would need spray paint, too. Something bright. Red, maybe. Something good, something that won’t come off with a charm.”

“Remus,” Lily speaks up. “Not to be vulgar, but what the fuck are you talking about?”

Remus seems to snap himself out of it. His eyes meet James’ again. There’s a manic sort of glint in them and James remembers something very important; that Remus would go to war for this. That there’s nothing he wouldn’t do.

“It would have to wait until after the next full,” Remus murmurs.

“We can do that,” James tells him. “Just tell us what it is you’re thinking.”

“You’ve got betony in that potions kit, right?” Remus asks Lily, not looking at her.

Lily swings her legs out of the bed. “You’re going to get us killed.”

“Not if we’re smart about it,” Remus defends weakly.

“When have we ever done anything smart?” James asks.

“My thoughts exactly,” Lily mutters, and crosses the room to check her potions supplies. “James, get my notebook. I have the feeling we’re going to need it.”

Pads,

Remus is fantastic, and also insane.

I think you were the cornerstone for him, quite honestly. Like a paperweight. Or maybe he just spent so much time trying to anchor you that he tied himself down, too. Either way, now that you're not here, he's really coming out with them left right and centre. Lily and I can hardly keep up.

It's a week until the next full, and he and I and her are working as hard as we possibly can to get this right. I explained the plan to you in the last letter, so if you didn't read it properly, go do that now, but it's gotten even crazier since. He reckons I should take a knife, now, rather than a baton. I'm not sure I agree, because I think a bat would still be best, so he's said to wait until we've got our hands on some stuff and see which feels most comfortable. A knife, Pads! Our Remus, telling me to take a knife to a wand-fight! They grow up so fast.

You've been on the front page for a week now. It's like when you first escaped, the week after the wedding. He's pissed at you, seriously pissed. No pun intended there. Wonder if he's got a lead on you, or he's just getting frustrated that he hasn't got anything? Hopefully the latter.

Remus and I are considering consulting muggle papers about you. It's about the only lead we've got left. He spends a lot of time watching BBC World News. Don't know what he expects to see. A miracle, maybe, I guess.

Lily says hi. She's still awake for some reason. Chopping up betony for the paint canisters in the bathroom, I think. Yeah, I can hear it now. Tap tap tap tap tap of the knife on the countertop. What a life we all live. When I imagined my teenage years as a kid, this was not what I had in mind. It

was a whole lot more pretty girls and drinking and motorbikes, though we've got Lily, I guess, and Remus rented a bicycle yesterday to get to the other side of London and scout out the Ministry, so that's something.

We're getting somewhere! What was it Lyric said on the radio? Vive la Révolution!!

Yours,

Prongs.

Remus and James take the train to the southwest coast for the full. On the way, dozy with moonsickness, Remus sleeps on James' shoulder, hair tickling his neck. James stares out of the window and drinks in the scenery. It's nothing like sunny green Wales, but the ocean looks the same, steely grey just like it was in Southerndown.

"Fags," a man grunts as he passes their seats on the way off the train.

James scowls and deliberately drops an arm around Remus' shoulders. The wizarding world isn't much better for it, but at least people feel the need to hold their tongues for politeness' sake over that side of London.

Remus slips a little down the front of his jacket, face smooshed to James' collarbone, blissfully unaware.

When the train pulls up to its last stop, a sleepy seaside town with a large patch of woods three miles off, Remus and James start their trek out into the wilderness, through thick patches of overgrown farmland, past fields of sheep. The afternoon sun scorches down over them both. Remus

sticks close to James' side and laughs as James complains about the smell of sheep shit.

"We're gonna stink for days," James grumbles, clambering over a wooden sty and offering Remus a hand to climb it behind him. "Lily's gonna make us shower for three hours."

"A terrible fate."

"Suppose she'll have to put up with it."

Remus grins at the ground. After a few moments, he squints off into the bright, hot sun and his smile falls off his face.

"The wolf misses him. Padfoot, I mean."

"Oh," James says. He can't think of much else to say to that.

"Yeah." Remus shrugs like he's trying to dislodge a troubling thought, or maybe just one of the hovering gnats that buzz on the golden air. "He can tell Sirius isn't here. It upsets him."

"He was affectionate the last few times."

Remus smiles crookedly. "Maybe he thinks Prongs is a replacement."

James shoves Remus' shoulder, sending him stumbling into the long, brown grass. Remus shoves him back. On the horizon, the sea shines with sunlight, so bright and hot it's blinding.

They spend the night chasing one another through the woods and over the fields by the pale light of the moon. The wolf is playful, a little snappish but not unhappy, though he howls often, maybe to see if Padfoot is nearby. James manages to corral him with only a minor injury (Remus

takes a snap at his front leg that James dodges, falling into a tangle of thick, dry branches and sustaining a gouge through the shoulder in the process).

By dawn, the moon sinking behind a dull cloud on the horizon, Remus' wolfish body freezes in place, knotted in the brambles. Then, he transforms back, bones creaking and cracking, and James changes just in time to catch Remus as he topples into the nettles, dragging him onto a flat patch of sandy dirt.

"Atta boy," James grunts, as Remus -- human Remus, warm and stiff and groaning -- shuffles in his arms. "C'mon, I don't want to see your bits, you need to take me out on a date first..."

He manhandles Remus into a spare change of pants and a thick, woolen jumper. Remus doesn't protest, because even half-asleep, he knows he isn't under attack. A part of James glows with the pride of being trusted. Dressing used to be Sirius' job.

Beneath the pre-dawn grey light they lie in the dirt in a tangle, James breathing heavily from the transformation, eyes burning with exhaustion.

"Thanks," Remus murmurs into the hollow of his throat.
"You okay?"

James takes stock. His shoulder is still bleeding sluggishly, but the wound isn't deep. "Just fine. You?"

"Think I've got something wrong with my leg."

"Yeah, you ran into a barbed-wire fence. It's nothing bad. Doesn't need stitches, I don't think."

“Good.” Remus flops further onto him.

James brushes the tawny off his forehead with his fingers, clumsy and rough, then keeps that hand cupped around the back of Remus’ head like a shield against the rising sun.

By morning, they’ll have to dust themselves off and get back to town for the noon train. Now, they can lie here and rest.

“Hey.” James shakes Remus’ arm gingerly. He knows how sore he can get. “Look. The dog star.”

Remus makes an assenting noise. When James looks at him, his glassy eyes are piercing through the clouds and through the stars and staring far, far away.

Back at the hotel room, Lily is sitting on the double bed with a map of the ground floor of the Ministry spread out in front of her. When James and Remus stumble in, she looks up at them, gawps for a second, and then folds up the map so James can deposit Remus, who is leaning heavily against him, on the bed.

“Hi,” she says cautiously, watching them both. “Everything go okay?”

“Just peachy,” James grunts. “Ow, Moony, that’s my bad shoulder--”

“Sorry,” Remus mumbles, gathering his shaky legs under him as he shuffles beneath the covers. His pale face is mildly sunburnt from the trek out to the woods yesterday. He smiles faintly at Lily. “Everything been okay here?”

"Yeah, just fine." Lily keeps watching them. "Held down the fort just fine. James, your shoulder--"

"It's fine." Shucking off his jacket, James dumps it on the bed beside Remus. "Gonna go patch myself up--" He gestures vaguely towards the bathroom. "Get some sleep, Remus."

"Hypocrite," Remus rasps.

"I know. I pride myself on it." James stalks off into the bathroom, toeing his shoes off on the way.

After some time struggling to get a bandage around his shoulder, Lily seems to sense his frustration, because she knocks gently on the bathroom door and then comes in to sit him down on the countertop as she dresses the wound for him. For some time, James thinks (hopes) she isn't going to ask. Unfortunately, Lily Evans is not in the business of holding her tongue when there's something she wants to say.

"What happened?" she asks casually, as she pulls the gauze tight.

James winces. "Dead tree," he says honestly. "Y'know, when the branches get all hard and rigid? Fell into a knot of that stuff. Hurt, but not too bad."

"You and Remus go for a hike, or...?"

"Something like that." James figures she would have sussed him out already. The fact that she's asking at all says she hasn't got it yet. "He walked into a barbed wire fence. You should take a look at him, too."

“He’s the best healer of all of us,” she dismisses. “I’m sure he’d be horrified to think of anybody else taking care of him.”

“You can say that again.” James flexes his shoulder inside the bandage. “Good as new.”

Lily eyes him in the mirror, a dubious, unhappy slant to her eyebrows. “You’re sure that’s all?”

“Of course. Right as rain.” James slips down off the countertop and stretches, feeling the wound pull conspicuously. He smiles at her as reassuringly as he can. “Remus and I...” And he trails off.

Lily watches him for a moment longer. “Okay,” she murmurs eventually, when it becomes obvious the silence is going to stretch. “Okay.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah.”

It’s not forever. But she seems to have come to terms with the fact that she’s going to have to give up for now. James nods to her thankfully, then leaves the bathroom and returns to Remus, who is already halfway asleep, buried in his pillow.

James sits beside him. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” Remus murmurs. “You?”

“Always.”

Remus smiles faintly. “G’night.”

"G'night," James tells him. He waits there until Remus is asleep to get up.

Lily reenters the room, first aid kit under her arm. They stare at one another, and then James cuts the silence.

"We can go over the plan again?"

Lily smiles grimly at him. "Yeah. Let's do that."

Pads,

Tomorrow evening, we're all going to do something very stupid, so this letter is going to be less message and more obituary, just in case I actually end up dead. It's a slim chance I think (I'm good luck! Or I hope I am, anyway) but it's there. So.

Here are some things I never told you:

It was me that stole your cigarettes at the start of fourth year. You didn't speak to Peter for a week after they vanished because you thought it was him, but it was actually me. I never said anything because you always took my side in arguments, and you always spent more time with me when you were angry at one of the others, and I liked that. I liked how it made me feel when you singled out me and only me to spend time with. We joked about it being me who lead the Marauders, but you led me, every time.

I also nicked one of your charms essays in third year and handed it in as my own, charmed the handwriting to look like mine and everything. You got all panicked and weird when you realised it was gone and I didn't realise it was actually upsetting you until it was too late and then I felt

too bad about it to give it back to you or own up to it. So, uh, sorry for that.

I never noticed anything wrong. Not all through fourth year or at the end of it, when you got off the train and said goodbye. The weight of that secret must have been crushing you, maybe even for years, and I didn't notice a single thing. I try to think back a lot, try to identify things I could have seen, signs I could have picked up on. But I'm a self-centred prat and I can never find anything, not beyond stuff I thought was normal, like dark bruises that didn't go away and weird arguments between you and Remus, who I know knows more than me, because he's smart, smart like you, and I'm not smart. I never have been.

Watching Andromeda die still gives me nightmares most nights, and I see it every time I close my eyes, every time I blink. But I'd let her die a million times over if I could see you again. Dumbledore, too. It sort of scares me how many people I'd be willing to see die if it meant seeing you live. I said it in a letter a while ago, but I sometimes worry I love you too much. More than is normal and healthy.

But then, I suppose, none of this is normal. None of this is healthy. You're not and I'm not and we never will be again.

Some other things, before I fall asleep and forget to finish this: you've got perfect teeth, I used to be jealous of them and now I just miss them. You were taller when I saw you at the wedding and it suits you, tallness. I never actually liked liquorice wands, but you love them, so I used to eat them when you offered me one just to make you smile, even though I think they're bloody awful. In first year, if you'd gone to Hufflepuff or Ravenclaw, I think I would've asked the hat to let me follow you there. Every black dog I see makes me paranoid and twitchy because I keep thinking

it's you. Remus cries sometimes when he thinks neither of us knows. Caramel wafers are nicer than any magical sweet there is. I keep one of your old letters to me in my back pocket most days, and it's so worn that it's torn along the folds, and when it disintegrates I think I'll dissolve with it. I'm scared. Really scared. Boy that's hard to say.

Anyway. I think that's all the secrets I can put down for tonight.

Pray for me. I love you.

Yours,

Prongs.

Stuffy and biting with cold, the night is particularly dark tonight, the yellow-orange light pollution of London sending the clouds glowing an odd, bioluminescent brown, rippling with shadow. Ice has already started to form on the outside of the phone box with the chill of mid-autumn.

With fumbling hands, James punches in the numbers Remus told him to memorise. Six-two-four-four-two. He barely hears his conversation with the welcome witch, her cool, clear voice falling on deaf ears, blind with buzzing and ringing. He clenches a shaking hand around the sleeve of his leather jacket over and over, furling and unfurling his fingers. *Come on. Keep it together.*

When the floor of the phone box drops like a lift, the whole thing sliding down into the ground, James takes position, half-slumped against the wall, boneless and bow-legged. His reflection stares at him from the glass wall beside him, stark through the darkness. Lily has dyed his hair bright, obnoxious yellow, as pale and stringy as straw, and he's

wearing muggle board shorts with flames on them and a mesh shirt and a leather jacket. His neon green socks blink up at him from where they peak in a strip over his black boots.

He looks every part the drunken layabout, fresh off the end of a muggle nightclub.

There's a faint click. The dark walls let up, light streaming in as the phonebox descends down into the silent, empty atrium.

James has been to the Ministry Headquarters before a few times, mostly with his dad as a kid. It's one of those places that never changes, always the same colour scheme, always the same layout, though the dull, greenish brick walls look darker lit than usual, the lights scattered across the ceiling of the atrium dull and washed-out. It might have felt like the same place as it was two months ago if James didn't know better.

The phonebox hits the atrium floor. The door clicks open and James slumps out of the box, torso flopping onto the tiled floor, legs still inside.

Just to plan, it doesn't move back up, waiting for him to exit fully. *Yes.*

For the first five minutes, there's silence. James' left leg starts to get pins and needles, but he still doesn't move, staying perfectly still in his position sprawled halfway out of the phonebox. Tonight, if Lily got it right, there are only meant to be two guards patrolling the lower levels. Any minute now, they should come by.

Across the atrium, a clock ticks loudly on the wall. James eyes it through his lashes. It does not, in fact, oblige to shut

up and be quiet.

After what might be ten minutes or ten hours, for how long it feels, an elevator across the room pings open and two sets of footsteps click out, sharp and unabashed. Two male voices drift on the tepid air towards James.

--Was never really very useful, really," the first guard is saying. "I mean, he was good with missions and the like, but awful with paperwork, and all the technical stuff. Only ever wanted to be out on the field. He wouldn't have made it five years doing the real thing."

"He sounds like a piece of work," the other guy says.

The first guard grunts. "Yeah, if there's anybody I'm bloody glad to be shot of, it's Scrimgeour. It's been a week since he resigned and the office is already nicer."

"You've had a lot of resignations, haven't you? The Aurors, I mean."

"Yeah, quite a lot. Not more than we expected. In this line of work, people get cold feet easily."

"I'm glad it's helped the workplace feel less... distracting."

The first guard laughs. "The way the Ministry's going, we're going to have a lot less pointless bureaucracy soon, and thank god for that. Suppose that'll be your lot's influence."

Awkward silence falls. James has to put in an immense effort not to clench his jaw up. *Traitor*, he wants to yell to the (presumably trainee) Auror. *Traitor. You're helping your enemy to save your own hide.*

“Hey,” the first guard says, then. “The guest entrance is down... is that a body?”

Running footsteps. Still James stays still, mouth slightly parted, eyes closed. Through his eyelids, he sees shadow fall across his face. Over him, there’s the distinct wood-on-metal *shing* of somebody drawing their wand.

“Wait,” the Auror says. “I think it’s a muggle.”

“A muggle?” The death eater sounds doubtful. “No, the entrances are muggle repellent, aren’t they?”

“We’ve had muggles come down before, I think,” the Auror rebukes, though he doesn’t sound particularly sure of himself.

The scratch of fabric. Somebody kneels down close to James and prods at his cheek with their wand. James screws up his face and groans lowly.

“I think he’s drunk,” the Auror says nervously.

“Maybe,” the death eater says. Then, “*Avada--*”

Before James can react, before he can even process the word, the Auror shouts, “No!”

The death eater cuts off. “Excuse me?”

“I just mean-- I just mean--” the Auror stammers, “It’s standard protocol to contact the muggle liaison office, so they can... so they can handle memory modifications...” He trails off.

“The muggle liaison office,” the death eater says staunchly, “Was decommissioned last week, Dawlish.”

“Oh,” the Auror says faintly. “Right.”

The death eater moves again. Thinking fast, James rolls onto his back and slurs, “Whass’goin’ on?”

“Stay where you are,” the death eater tells him sternly. When James looks up, there are two white men peering down at him. The Auror has a shock of reddish-brown hair and a stout physique. The death eater is aristocratic white-blond, with greyish, doleful eyes. They’re both watching him with a mixture of confusion and distrust.

“This isn’t Eden,” James murmurs, making a show of looking around. “D’you know how far we’re from Eden? You know the place, d’n’t you? The club on Leander Close. They’ve got the big green neon sign...”

“Bloody hell,” the Auror mutters.

James tries to stagger to his feet, rolling over. “Stay down!” the death eater shouts at him.

With his feet off it, the phonebox jolts, the door snapping shut with a click. As it starts to rise, the two guards turn to glance at it, distracted, and James takes his chance.

Reaching into the back of his jacket, he whips out the baseball bat and lunges at the death eater. The death eater shouts in alarm, lashing out his wand wildly. James hurtles the bat hard down against the man’s wrist, rewarded with a sharp, piercing crack for his efforts. It echoes out through the atrium like the toll of death. The wand rolls away and James’ motion carries him off at an angle. He staggers, one foot after the other, and the Auror casts a curse that goes disappearing off behind him, reflecting off the walls in a miasma of spinning colours.

“My wand!” the death eater howls. Head spinning, James lunges to pick it up and snaps it, hard, over his knee.

Another curse flies at him, howling like a hurricane. James barely dives beneath it, watching the green blur spark against the floor behind him, scraping like muggle machinery. Then he hauls himself back up and faces the Auror, who scowls at him, wand raised.

“Stand down!” the auror snaps.

“No,” James says curtly, and rushes him, hurling the bat up underarm into the Auror’s midriff. The Auror shouts out, winded, and a misfired curse whistles past James’ ear in a flurry of sparks.

James reaches out and grapples with the Auror’s wrist and they wrestle for a senseless moment. The wood of the Auror’s wand hot against his palm, he gets a good grip on it and tugs forcefully, and the Auror goes staggering into him and they both hit the ground hard. James manages to force the Auror’s fingers off his wand and rolls away, snapping it in a fluid motion, bat under his arm.

The Auror makes a grab for him. His hands scrabble against the back of James’ jacket. James gets his feet under him and whips around, swinging the bat backwards and then cracking it against the side of the Auror’s head with a noise like a gunshot. The Auror’s bloody head rolls against the tile and he goes still.

James looks up. The death eater meets his eyes over the top of his exposed Dark Mark.

“Fuck!” James shouts, and takes a running leap over the Auror’s body. The death eater raises a finger to press down against it and, thinking fast, James feigns a swing to the left

and then dives to the right of the death eater, cracking the baseball bat against the man's ribs and getting a satisfying crunch for his efforts. The death eater crumples, yelling, and James kicks him hard across the face, then again, then again. Blood splatters across the tile.

There, on the ground, the death eater goes still.

For a few moments, James stands in the silence, staring down at the unconscious guards. *I did that*. It's a strange mixture of intense horror and furious, glowing pride.

High above, there's a whining, rattling sound. James looks up in time to see the telephone box descend out of the ceiling again.

When it touches down in front of him, Remus and Lily pile out together, staring from James and his bloody boots and his baseball bat, to the guards piled on the tiles.

"Wow," Remus says breathlessly.

"Yeah," murmurs James. "I did it."

"Great," Lily says, all business. "Remus, come on, let's get them out of here. James, stay here."

James nods, watching his friends haul the heavy bodies off towards the floos, where they pile them up in an empty grate. There's a sticky splatter of blood on the side of his face, lashed across his cheek. He imagines he must look completely ridiculous.

Lily prods at one of the blood trails on the ground with her foot. "Guess somebody else will clean them up," she mutters.

Remus takes James' side. "You with us?" he asks.

James shakes himself, nodding. "Yeah," he says. "Yeah, I'm good." He grins then, bright and fierce. "I'm great."

Remus grins back at him. "Good. Let's get this over with."

Lily reaches into her cloth shoulder bag, pulling out three canisters of spray paint and handing them to James and Remus, keeping one for herself. Atop each has been taped a smaller pressurised pouch of betony, with a tiny plastic tube made of a muggle straw plastered atop the nozzle.

"It should spray out both at the same time," she explains, as the three of them stride across the atrium to the far wall, rounded and visible from all directions, spanning sixty feet wide. "The betony should make it impossible to magically clean off the paint, and pretty bloody difficult to clean manually, too."

"And you're sure they won't explode on impact?" James confirms, watching Remus' muggle overshirt stream out around him as he walks. Bloody hell, he looks *cool* like that.

Lily nods. "Well. Mostly."

"Right. That's reassuring."

Remus examines the wall for a moment, eyes narrowed. An artist scoping out a new canvas. "Okay," he murmurs. "James, start at the bottom with 'still' -- that last bit can afford to be a little smaller."

"Got it." James shakes the paint canister, listening to the satisfying rattle. "You've got more of this stuff, right, Lils?"

“He asks as if I haven’t thought of every possibility,” Lily says airily. “Remus, do you want me on ‘army’?”

“Yeah,” Remus says, taking the far end to the left, furthest from James. James watches him fish around in his pocket for a bandana, knotting it around the back of his head and pulling tight, then shuffling it up over his nose and mouth. Lily and James do the same with their own.

Then, James raises the spray can and presses down on the nozzle.

The sharp smell of muggle paint mixes with the tangy bitterness of betony on the air. Brilliant gold spray splatters across the green-tiled wall in a tight, glittering trail. Splatters of paint whip out onto James’ sleeves and clothes and a few speckles onto his face.

For the first time since June, he feels like he’s doing magic again. And it’s *wonderful*.

Remus lets out a startled laugh from across the atrium, and without looking over James can hear the grin in it. Lily’s laughing too, astonished and bright. James raises the can high, held back so the shape of the letters is wider, their lines thicker, and traces a tall ‘S’ onto the wall, stretching high above his head and right down to the floor, where the paint drips onto the skirting, beading with condensation.

They must spend hours there, for how long it feels, tracing the words into the wall. James finishes his section and switches with Lily, whose red paint she uses to outline his own words while he traces her scarlet lettering in gold. Then Remus adds silvery grey embellishments to the whole thing, nimble hands swooping and diving over the words, making them pop from the wall like an explosion. It’s wild and wonderful like magic is. James feels like if he only

closes his eyes, he could imagine he's still back at Hogwarts. But there's no time to close his eyes.

They've still got three canisters left by the time the lettering is done, so Lily, laughing like a maniac, takes a can of neon pink and sprints off towards the elevators to deface them in luminescent fuschia. Remus grabs James' hand and drags him to the statue in the centre of the atrium -- a tall, white wizard, standing alone overlooking the room -- and they hose it down in tones of peacock blue and gamma green, running in dizzying circles around it until it looks more like a defective lab experiment than a statue, dripping in goopy paint.

"Wait," Remus tells him, laughing in that gaspy way like it's so funny he's lost his breath. "Wait--"

He drags them both to a stop and they spin off at a loose angle, hands tangled, tripping over one another's legs as they lilt across the atrium floor like ballroom dancers. James laughs desperately into Remus' face and they breathe in the same tight, chemical-smelling air.

"Wait," Remus says again, and steadies himself against James. "Turn around, turn around, let me--"

James spins and hears the hiss of Remus' spray can against the back of his jacket. "What are you putting on there?"

"You'll see." Remus finishes. "Don't lean against anything for a bit."

"Okay," James grins, spinning back around. Remus' bandana-covered, paint-splattered face is the most beautiful thing he's ever seen.

Lily comes running. From behind James, she says, "What does that-- *oh*."

Remus smiles secretively at her. When James catches his eye, he winks.

"What time is it?" James asks distractedly, handing the last canister back to Lily, who stows it in her purse, along with Remus'.

"Almost three," Lily tells them. "The guard rotation changes soon, we should-- we should get out of here." Her smile is still stuck to her face, though, so the sense of urgency doesn't quite evoke alarm.

"Right. Right, come on, let's get out of here--"

Remus snares his wrist. "Wait," he says. "Let me just--"

He staggers towards their largest message, up against the wall. Lily and James follow, and the three of them stop to take it in for a moment. Red, silver and gold. Bright and bold and completely unmissable.

PADFOOT'S ARMY: STILL RECRUITING

"I like it," Remus decides. He wraps James' hand in his own. James squeezes very hard.

"Me, too," he says.

"It's good," Lily says. Without any doubt. "It'll be enough, I think." She clears her throat. "Now, if we don't get out of here soon we're going to get murdered, so let's run."

"Okay," James says. He turns away from the message. "Let's run," he agrees.

Pads,

WE DID IT!!! WE BLOODY WELL DID IT!!

You would have loved it!! We messed the whole place up, graffiti'd the walls and the elevators and that huge awful statue. I've never seen Remus so happy, and Lily, too. I think we all needed it. We just got back to the hotel room (we had to floo to Diagon Alley from the Ministry and then run home, but we didn't get caught!) and we all stink of chemicals and betony. Remus is smoking a cigarette out of the window. Lily's taken the first shower.

The prick spray-painted the back of my jacket! PA + RL. Padfoot's Army, Remus Lupin. I think he thinks I'm gonna throw it away, but the betony's made the paint all bright and glassy so I'm keeping it, it looks so bloody cool. And I knocked out two guards, Pads! Kablam, kaboom, with my baseball bat! I left the bat there, which is a let-down, but Lily says we can find another one. I did it! All on my own! Left them feeling very sorry they clocked in today, I bet.

Man! Man! Man! I'm going to have an adrenaline crash and it's going to wipe me out and I don't even care!

I love you!

Yours,

(a very happy, wishing you were here) Prongs.

"What an eventful week!" Gambit starts the next broadcast with, two days later. James, Lily and Remus, sitting in a tight circle on the hotel room floor around the radio, exchange furtive looks. "So much to discuss, isn't there, Lyric?"

"Doubt it'll be news to anybody, but yeah, it's been quite the time!" Lyric agrees jovially. "Amazing stuff, just amazing!"

"Before we get into the news," Gambit takes over, "For any new listeners, welcome one and all to the fourth weekly broadcast of *Direct Action*, your number one source on all things magical Britain that the Prophet doesn't want you to hear about. This week is mostly good news -- and thank god, we're in dire need of it -- but, as always, we'll start with the sour stuff. I'm Gambit, your host, passing off to Lyric for this week's death toll."

"Thanks, Gambit," Lyric says. "First off, we've got news that a group of French freedom fighters in Surrey have been found dead in a muggle bus station. Names as-of-yet unknown, but we do know there were four of them, all ex-Beauxbatons. If anybody has any information on their identities, uh, reach out, I suppose. Sure you can find us if you look hard enough."

Lily and James glance at one another, raising their eyebrows.

"What else have we got... ah, yeah. We've had a family member come forward and let us know that Andromeda Black was killed two months ago, at the Rosier Wedding. Our condolences to her loved ones. A Black family defector rumoured to have been aiding the rebellion, she will be missed."

James' heart clenches. He closes his eyes for a long moment, unable to look at Lily's and Remus' concerned faces.

"We've also got reports that Veela rights advocate Ardella Boots has been found strangled outside of her Oxfordshire flat early this morning. Hogwarts-educated and Scottish,

she was known for her extensive work for Veela equality, as well as her contributions to muggle feminism and her advocacy for half-breed liberation. Salute to her tonight, folks; what a fantastic life."

The air is sufficiently soured now. Remus folds his hands in his lap, crossing and uncrossing his fingers just like James does. James stares at the radio like he can will it to share good news. Lily sighs, long and heavy, and rolls onto her back to look at the ceiling, her side pressed up against Remus'.

"As for missing persons," Gambit takes over solemnly, "Professor Slughorn, head of Slytherin house and potions master at Hogwarts, has reportedly been missing for over a week now. While he's due to be replaced soon, we're on the look-out for him, and so should all of you be, too. We've no extra news on any other open missing persons, though there are rumours that Rubeus Hagrid has been sighted overseas. We can't confirm any of these, but hey, here's to hoping, I suppose..."

"For all the curious people asking us," Lyric takes over, slightly mirthful, "No, we haven't got any news on the Black Brothers. As fascinating as that whole thing is, I get the impression the elder doesn't want to be found. As soon as we know anything, you'll know, we promise."

"Now!" Gambit claps her hands near the mic and makes it ring out for a second. "Ah, apologies. Now. Onto the good news. Lyric, if you will."

"For anybody who's been living under a rock," Lyric scoffs, "Two days ago, in the early hours of Sunday morning, at the London headquarters of the Ministry, two guards were found knocked out and shoved into one of the floos by the

unfortunate workers due to take the next shift. Knocked out by muggle weapons -- some sources are telling us it was a baseball bat, or at least, that's what the guards said -- they had been attacked by an unidentified teenage in muggle clothing and stowed away."

"And the ministry entrance hall," Gambit says, laughing, "Is painted tip to tail with muggle spray paint, would you believe it? 'Padfoot's Army: Still Recruiting' along the wall of the atrium, and apparently, no matter how hard the Ministry tries to scrub it off, the paint won't lift! Absolutely brilliant! To the kids that did this: you're the real war effort here, we're very proud of you."

"For anybody who doesn't know," Lyric says, "Padfoot's Army-- well, it's a little complicated-- 'Padfoot' was one of Sirius Black's nicknames in school. When he vanished, some young Gryffindors allegedly -- ALLEGEDLY, Gambit! We were prefects, so we didn't know for sure -- started an underground training regime, getting kids to learn how to fight Dark wizards and the like, in readiness for the war. We're not naming the leaders here, for their own safety and because they're still underage, but we know who you are, and we're pretty sure you're listening, you gutsy kids, stick it to 'em!"

Gambit hoots celebratorily. "Good stuff, good stuff. Great for morale. We'll be making contact with Padfoot's Army very soon, so maybe one of these days we can have these kids on the show, Lyric?"

"That sounds divine, Gambit."

"Then for you, I'll make it happen."

"My heart belongs only to you," Lyric proclaims. Both hosts snicker.

“Okay!” Gambit says, taking the reins of the show again.
“Now! In other news, here’s a rundown of some recent
Ministry legislation...”

Padfoot’s Army,

*Hoping this letter finds you! Not sure you’re in good health,
so I suppose that might have been an odd way to start it.*

*We figured you wanted to talk to us, with a stunt like that.
Or, well, if we’re not that important you can let the owl
come back without a letter, and it’ll be quite humiliating for
everybody involved, I’m sure.*

So. Still recruiting? So are we.

Cheers,

Friends of London.

Friends of London,

*Cheers to you lot! We love ‘Direct Action’, lifts our spirits
greatly. We’re hiding out in a pretty eponymous place, so it
shouldn’t be too hard to get to you, if you’ll let us. We want
to get to know you, want to put faces to the voices. We also
desperately need protection, information, money, food, aid.
Other such ordinary things.*

*It’s me and the two other ringleaders, and that’s all. We’ve
been on the run for a while. Already wrote a letter to you
and it didn’t get to you. We’ve got some pretty valuable
information we’re pretty sure nobody else has. Get in
contact quick. We’ve had trouble getting into Gringotts,*

with the whole world ending and everything, so we're quite broke.

Glad you enjoyed our stunt! It was fun. Honestly, I think we could all do with a laugh right now.

Hoping to see you soon,

Padfoot's Army.

"We're really doing this," Remus whispers to James that night, their letter to the Friends of London sent only hours before. Neither of them has written to Sirius tonight. There will always be time tomorrow.

James nods, watching Remus from his own pillow. They stare into each other's eyes in the peaky darkness. "We are."

Remus scans his face, eyes dragging over every wrinkle, every pimple. They trace the planes of James' cheeks. Something in his face says, *I will love you until there's no love left.*

"We'll find him," James promises. "You know we will."

"How can you be sure?"

James shuffles their hands together under the covers. "Because if anybody's better at making trouble than us, it's him."

Remus smiles nakedly. "I don't know that that's enough."

"We'll make it enough."

"That's not how it works, James."

“He wouldn’t want us to worry.”

Remus laughs. “Yes, he would, and you know it.”

James does know it. There’s no getting around it. “Kiss me?” he asks.

Remus hesitates. “Okay.”

Chapter End Notes

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HUNTERS

Chapter Notes

twos for this chapter: violence, non-detailed discussion of suicidality, more non-sexual grooming

enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Jamie,

I've come to terms with the fact that this story is going to be non-chronological, and you're just gonna have to put up with that, I'm afraid. Every letter I've written for you in the past month I've ended up burning, so. I'm just gonna. Start with the easiest stuff. I think.

Regulus was eleven when he first told me he's going to get the Dark Mark someday. That's sort of when it actually started.

"He's asleep, I think," Yí'ān's soft voice murmurs from close by.

Sirius registers that he's curled up on Galina's sofa, in the basement apartment she shares with Yí'ān and every other traumatised queer halfblood in Iceland. It takes his every effort not to stiffen. He doesn't remember falling asleep. The last thing he does remember is telling them... telling them about him. About Riddle. His blood runs cold. *Stupid.*

"Yeah." Galina sighs from somewhere near the doorway, heavy and tired. "Thorbjörg above, Yí'ān."

"I know. I know."

Galina laughs hoarsely. "You know," she says in her half-slavic voice, "There must be something I'm doing wrong, to keep drawing strange, runaway teens my way. You were just like him, when you found me."

"Same age, too," Yí'ān says. He says something in one of their common languages -- Norwegian, Sirius thinks. Galina laughs like it's the last time she's ever going to laugh again.

"Always knew it'd be a matter of time before Britain fell," she says, in English again.

"I would've thought we'd have more time."

"That's war."

"Right." Yí'ān pauses. "Remind me to kill Tom bloody Riddle if we ever run into each other. What a..." He trails off. "You don't do that to a kid. Y'know. You saw the way he..."

Sirius' back prickles with a stare and he gets the distinct impression Galina is staring at him. "He knows lots. Too much. Enough that he might try to go back."

"Hero complex. All our types've got it, you don't need to tell me that."

"Well," Galina murmurs. "Let's hope we can keep him here for now."

"If he wants to go back, will you let him?"

"You're miles west. Of course. I'm not in the business of tyranny."

Yí'ān snorts, standing up from the sofa. "You're not in the business of anything. You hate capitalism. You're in the commune of tyranny. The co-op of tyranny. Plus, you *despise* the West."

"Ha. Come, you. Let's let him rest." A hand ghosts over Sirius; a blanket lands over his shoulders, draping down over his legs. The light flicks off and the door closes.

In the darkness, Sirius stares at the wall. For once, he isn't cold.

He was just a baby, Reg was. We were back for Christmas break of my second year (remember how much you fretted when I had to go back? Ha) and he snuck to my room in the middle of the night and we sat in the wardrobe so nobody would hear us, and he told me he was going to get the Dark Mark someday, because the Slytherins had been talking about how it was the proper way to honor your family, if you seriously cared about purity and honor. He said he would get it so I didn't have to, and I don't cry, but if I'd ever been close, it was then.

We argued. Argued loud enough that our parents came and kicked him out, and I said it'd been me, that I'd blackmailed him out of his room, so I got a smack but nothing more. Guess they were worried about leaving marks. He didn't mention it to me again, but I knew that I couldn't change his mind, that he'd decided it was what he was going to do.

I couldn't let that happen, though, so that was the moment I properly started researching who Riddle was. I hadn't known much about him before, not beyond my parents saying he was the second coming of Christ and the papers

saying he was some foreign loony mad about blood politics, but it wasn't hard to find more once I knew what to look for. Funny thing about crazy fascists is that they don't often do a great job of covering their tracks. I figured out his old name pretty quickly (that was why we broke into the records room at Hogwarts in the last week of second year! I lied when I said it was for a prank. Sorry, Prongs). He grew up in a muggle orphanage. I don't think many knew that. Maybe it was just me and Dumbledore. Poetic irony, that.

When he came to our house for dinner in the summer after second year, the first time we met, I knew a bit about him then. Enough to get his ideology and what type of person he was. Overcompensating, maybe, and the type of bigot who doesn't have a specific ideology outside of hating Lesser Folks, so any bigots with specific ideologies can rally behind him because his ideas are vague enough to appeal. And the moment Reg asked me to go with him I made myself a promise: if either of us was going to get the Dark Mark, it'd be me.

(I'm not Marked, by the way. I don't think I would have been able to hide that from you. He always said he'd give me a Mark someday. Guess I got out of there just in time. Reg never got his either! Not yet, anyway. Not as far as I know. Fuck, Jamie.)

That first summer, when I was thirteen, he conducted one ritual, the one in the cave where he killed the muggle man. For a while after that, he left me alone. He would visit that next Christmas, a few times. To tell me stories of the things he was doing, the world he was building. The following summer, too. But he wouldn't conduct another ritual again, not for more than a year.

I was stupid for thinking I was safe, because things picked up quite quickly after that, and I suppose they never really slowed down.

The second was during the Christmas break of our fourth year. He came to our house on New Year's Eve, and Reg looked at me across the kitchen and I couldn't say no to either of them by that point (and I know I'm a rotten coward, and I'm sorry), so I went with him.

I'm not going to go into details because I still get nightmares about this one, quite a lot. But here goes nothing, I suppose.

Yí'ān rolls up a spliff, legs dangling off the side of the roof, heels slapping the concrete as he looks out over the dull underside of Reykjavik city. Pressed up beside him in one of Galina's heavy snow coats, Sirius watches the lights of a nearby gas station blink through the icy mist.

"Ah, fuck," Yí'ān mutters. "No lighter."

"I got it," Sirius says, fishing in the pockets. Galina gave him one of hers the other day and he carries it everywhere. He leans over to light the blunt. The dragon emblazoned along the outside of the stubby metal lighter lashes out its tail happily. Sirius loves magic.

"Thanks." Yí'ān takes a long, deep drag, then offers it to Sirius.

"Thanks," Sirius echoes. He puffs. Herb and rolling paper and the smell of pot smoke, heat ballooning in the back of his throat like a curse -- it's all so familiar. He hands it back.

He's been staying with Galina and Yí'ān for two weeks now. Summer must scorching hot like gunpowder back down south, back home. Soon it's going to shrivel up into a cool Autumn. That first night, he fell asleep on their sofa and slept for fifteen hours, and after that he just sort of stayed there. All his worldly possessions fit into a backpack -- a handful of change, a shock blanket, paper and pens, letters, the mirror -- so he doesn't go back to the hotel, nor to the off-licence lagoon a few miles out of the city where he'd been working.

"Galina's going to Latvia next week," Yí'ān comments absently. "She's meeting up with an old wandmaker friend she knows. She's gonna see what she can do about that nasty Trace on you."

Sirius stiffens. Even the burn of smoke in his sinuses isn't enough to phase him out yet. "She doesn't need to do that."

"She knows." Yí'ān shrugs. "She wants to. Small wars, remember?"

"I've done fine without magic so far."

Yí'ān rolls his eyes. "You would've died if you weren't an animagus." He takes another drag on the spliff. "Didn't know they taught that sort of magic at Hogwarts."

"They don't," Sirius says. "My friends and I learned it ourselves outside of the classroom. We're unregistered."

"Really?" Yí'ān squints at him. "Show me your form? You said you were a dog, right?"

Sirius rolls his eyes. He shuffles away from the edge of the roof and transforms, feeling the large, warm body of the big

black hound take him over.

Yí'ān stares. "Wow. You're big."

Sirius changes back. "That's what your mum told me the last time I saw her," he mutters, and shuffles back to the edge of the roof. "Gimme." He makes grabby hands at the blunt.

Holding the joint out of Sirius' reach, Yí'ān asks, "One more question. Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why did you want to learn? Just for kicks?"

Sirius shrugs, wrinkling up his nose. "For a friend," he says.

"Didn't think you had those," Yí'ān jokes. "Are they still alive?"

"I..." Sirius trails off. He thinks about what he knows; about the Trace, about the Ministry takeover, about soft, creative Remus, always reading, good at drawing, never quite sure whether it was his turn to speak.

Yí'ān seems to understand that the subject is sensitive. Wordlessly, he hands Sirius back the joint.

He brought me to a shack outside a small town. Somewhere in the southeast, I think, though don't quote me on that, I'm not certain about it. An overgrown little hovel, abandoned for years, the roof falling in. Old snakeskin pinned to the door.

His next target was already there. Some retired Ministry official called Bob Ogden. Riddle kneels down in front of him -- he'd got him tied up -- and he says

"You remember this place, don't you, Bob?" Riddle asks, voice extraordinarily smooth. He crouches in front of the quivering man.

Bob Ogden is eighty or eighty-five, maybe. He's trembling like a leaf, shackled to the rotting wooden floorboards, staring up at Riddle like he's looking into the face of god.

Sirius is fifteen years old. His birthday wasn't even two months ago. He wishes he was someone else. Anyone else. Back pressed against the grimy stone wall, falling apart with age and weather, bleached out by years of acid rain, he closes his eyes and prays for James to come crashing through the far wall and grab him and whisk him away.

"Answer me," Riddle says sleekly.

"Whatever you want from me," Ogden stutters, "I don't have it. If it's money you want--"

"You've been here before." Riddle stands up straight and stalks across the tiny shack, gesturing his arms out wide and grandiose. Even in this place, he manages to look like a king. Sirius watches him, not willing to let him out of his sight for a moment, so as to not get bitten. "You remember it, don't you?"

Any remaining colour drains from Ogden's face. He stammers for a moment. "That was years ago--"

"Did you," Riddle spins around on his heel. The walls shudder with pure power. "Did you, or did you not, threaten

the family of Marvolo Gaunt with incarceration and prosecution in this very house, not thirty years ago?"

Ogden stares, his small eyes bugging. "I..."

"I know." Riddle looms in large. He seems to expand out of his body with anger when he's lie this. Sirius dreads the day he has to face Tom angry. "I've seen it, Ogden. You were the reason my grandfather was sent to Azkaban; you were the reason Merope Gaunt felt the *disgusting* desire to marry a muggle, and dragged him like a common whore into her bed. I've seen the colour of your soul, and you're dying tonight, though you surely deserve much worse, for what you did to one of the sacred twenty-eight, to the last descendents of noble Salazar Slytherin--"

Sirius rushes forward and, like he's trying to defuse a bomb, grabs Riddle's wrist. "Tom!" he yells. The howling of the wind against the walls goes deadly silent.

Riddle looks over his shoulder at Sirius. Anger bleeding from his voice, he says, "Yes, Sirius?"

"You can't--" Sirius staggers over his words, forcing them out even though he knows he's making a dangerous, dangerous mistake. He forces the image of Regulus' face out of his head. "You can't. Please. Not another person. I can't do this again."

Riddle stares at him, like he's not quite sure what Sirius is saying.

"Please," Sirius says again. It makes every ounce of Black bone in him and every drop of Black blood *ache* to be so undignified, but he doesn't care. He thinks if he sees another person die he'll shatter into lots of tiny little pieces. "Just let him go. Tom. Please."

Riddle's dark eyes shutter from Sirius' hand on his arm up to Sirius' face and then back again. In a faint, dangerous voice, he says, "Are you questioning me, Sirius?"

"No, that's not-- no. Never." Sirius swallows back his fear. "Please--"

Quick as a viper, Riddle whips a hand back and slaps Sirius across the face, backhanded. Sirius staggers hard, head cracking backwards against his shoulder, and hits the mouldy stone wall. His cheek burns like fire. His back finds the cold, uneven brick and he slides down it to the floor, staring up at Riddle, hands clutching at his face. He can taste blood where one of his teeth has cut into the inside of his cheek.

"You do not," Riddle says, quiet rage in every single syllable of it, "Question my judgement. You do not presume to know better than I in affairs of war. You do not insubordinate me. You spoiled, arrogant, egotistical *wretch*--"

"I'm sorry!" Sirius yelps. "I'm sorry," he says again. I didn't mean it. Any of it. I'm sorry."

You're a coward, a voice that sounds like James tells him. *You're a rotten coward*.

Riddle kneels before him, gathering a fistful of Sirius' shirt in his hand and wrenching Sirius up to face him, their noses inches apart. The grip is strangling. Sirius tries to draw breath and can't get enough oxygen. It takes the defeat of every instinct he has to keep him from grappling with that thin, white hand. Like stepping into the open jaws of a snake and letting them snap shut. *Bloody bites*, he remembers. *I've the wit and the skill to lure them into bloodier bites*.

Gaze flicking between both of Sirius' eyes, Riddle nods slightly. "That's what I thought."

He slams Sirius back against the wall hard, then sweeps to his feet and returns to loom over Ogden, whose round, terrified face is blotchy and purplish.

"Now," Riddle tells Sirius, without looking back at him. "You watch, and you learn."

Sirius comes awake from the nightmare shouting, body vibrating with the phantom pain of his shirt cutting into his throat, his cheek burning, the hard stone wall at his back. The yell catches in the back of his throat and he realises he's lying on the sofa in Galina's apartment.

The door slams open. The lights blink on and Galina is hovering in the doorway, wand out, staring at him. She's in her travelling clothes, a thick coat and heavy boots.

"I'm okay," Sirius gasps. "I'm okay. Sorry. Nightmare." His hands scrabble against the sofa cushions as he pushes himself up to sit against the arm, shaking hard enough that he thinks he might just shake out of his skin.

"Can I come closer?" Galina asks, surprisingly gently.

Sirius thinks about that one for a second. She's not anything like Riddle, though -- not a man, not as tall as he was, not as composed. "Yeah," he says.

Galina shuffles her bag off her shoulder and sits beside him on the sofa. The cushions sink. Sirius feels moored by nothing, like the world could shift by a single degree and

he'd go flying off into nothingness, out of orbit. The yellowish bulb in the ceiling sways and lurches.

She takes his arm exceedingly gently. If she was Remus, she might have said, *it wasn't real*. Instead, she says, "I'm sorry."

"What are you sorry for?" Sirius sniffs. "You don't need to be sorry. Didn't do anything."

Galina shakes her head. She looks old beyond her years. "During the first war," she says stallingly, "I was a Durmstrang student. The school was not a pleasant place to be then, especially not for those of us who were of impoverished European countries, those of us from the east, those of us who suffered so greatly only years later, during the muggle war. Polish, western Soviet, Latvian, Luthianian, Hungarian. I am a halfblood and that put a target on my back, too, for not many halfbloods were so brave as to try to survive a place like that. It's still like that today."

A prickle of guilt surges up Sirius' back. Unbidden, he remembers Lily Evans. God. She's probably dead by now. James is going to be devastated.

"Many of my friends," Galina says, "Had nightmares, then. When I joined the fight against Grindelwald, they snapped my wand, took my magic away. For some time, I was like you."

"Oh," Sirius says.

Galina nods. "I've spent fifty years fighting fascism," she tells him, warm hand squeezing his arm. "And I've seen a lot of trauma, and a lot of pain, and none of it have I ever blamed anybody for except for the people who inflicted it."

You're as much a warrior as any of us are. Nightmares don't change that. Remember that for me."

Sirius nods, suddenly desperately sad. "You're leaving?" he asks breathlessly, gesturing towards her travelling bag.

Galina cracks a smile. "We're going to get the Trace off you," she promises. "Then, you're joining the fight. And you're not doing it alone." She laughs, an airy sound. "Yí'ān likes you. I daresay I do, too."

Sirius's eyes burn. He scrubs his face with a hand. "I bring bad luck," he warns.

"We're all bad luck this side of the war," Galina dismisses. She tidies up his hair with a hand, brushing it out of his face, tucking it behind his ears in thick, dark strands. "Now. Back to sleep with you. Warriors need their rest if they're going to fight the power."

Sirius fights back a smile. "Bye, Galina."

"Bye, Sirius," Galina tells him, and Sirius watches her sling her bag over her broad back and step out of the room, turning off the light. Out in the hallway, her voice mingles lowly with Yí'ān's, both of them speaking in shards of Icelandic and Norwegian. The sound of their throaty, Nordic tongues is sort of like home.

and he kills him, and I watch, because I don't have a choice.

For the second time, Riddle did the ritual. I saw more of it this time -- a broad, alchemical array, scratched into a breastplate of bone and iron, and honey in a dark sucrier. The thick smell of blood. He finishes the incantation and

the whole room lights up bright white. I hear him scream. The floor bubbles under us like lava and then it's over, and he's holding a black signet ring.

He's bleeding this time -- not from anywhere specific. Just bleeding. Like he's melting. He crawls to me and puts the ring into my hand and tells me he's going to be unkillable, and I could be, too, if I wanted to be. Because I'm angry at my mother like he was. Because I'm young and brave and good at lying like he was. Because the two of us are the same.

Fuck, Jamie.

I'm going to keep writing. I can't stop now. I just can't.

I go back to school. Remus confronts me, because he can tell something's awfully wrong with me (ha, funny, that, something's awfully wrong with me in a way he'd never be able to fix, I don't think anybody could), and I yell at him and he doesn't stop. We finished our animagus transformations that month, remember that? End of January, just in time for the full moon. I think he only forgave me for that fight then. Neither you nor Peter noticed anything was wrong. You were busy in a prank war with Severus Snape, and Peter was busy following you around. I don't blame you. I don't think I could hold a grudge against you if I wanted to.

Halfway through February, Riddle owled me. He'd promised not to while he was at school but it wasn't like I could say no to him, right? And with his letter he included this diary, which he told me not to open. Grubby old thing, honestly. Looked like it was made during the war, for how shitty and thin the paper was. He told me to deliver it to a student -- Amelie Bullstrode, that second-year Slytherin,

remember? And I never did know what came of that whole thing, why he wanted it delivered, but I slipped it into her bag anyway.

I think deep down I knew what the diary was. It was the third of those... things he was making. The locket. The ring. The diary. Those were his first three.

Galina doesn't come home for a month. Sirius wonders if she's dead. When he tells Yí'ān that, Yí'ān laughs at him.

With September comes a brief period of maudlin, Sirius moping around the apartment with no idea what to do with himself at the idea of Hogwarts restarting. It's been almost a year and a half since he last saw the castle -- that hot June morning, he remembers it like you remember a bad injury -- and he still misses it like a limb. James and Remus won't be going back, and knowing them, they've warned Peter, too. Sirius spends a lot of time imagining the three of them together. Safe somewhere far from Riddle, where he can never get to them.

"You're going to worry yourself into an early grave," Yí'ān warns him.

"I'm already headed towards one," Sirius groans. "What's a few less years?"

"Less time spent with me," Yí'ān says promptly. "And I'm a delight."

Later that day, a friend comes around, buzzing in on the intercom. It's a cold, steel-grey day outside. Sirius hovers behind Yí'ān as he converses with them in tense Icelandic for a few minutes, the stranger's voice all staticky through the little speaker by the door to the flat.

Eventually, in English, Yí'ān says, "We've got a friend here, by the way. You might have heard about him. You speak English, don't you?"

"Not well," a heavily accented voice rings back. French. "I do my best."

"Okay." Yí'ān smiles reassuringly at Sirius, then says. "Come on down, Claude."

Claude is the tallest person Sirius has ever seen. They've got to be at least seven feet tall, and they stoop to get in through the door into the flat, scooping Yí'ān into a hug. Yí'ān's feet actually leave the ground. Sirius hovers nearby like a misplaced house plant and tries not to look too conspicuous.

"Sirius," Yí'ān introduces. "Meet Claude, my favourite dealer of unscrupulous magical artefacts and substances. Old friend from my cursebreaking days. Claude, this is Sirius Black."

Claude smacks a huge hand to their forehead. "Where do I know your name from..."

Sirius clears his throat. In French, he says, "I'm the most wanted person in magical Britain. That might be it..."

Sirius trails off. He doesn't know whether to say *monsieur* or *mademoiselle* and settles on *monsieurmoselle*, which Claude roars with laughter at.

"Most wanted," they say, in smooth, easy French, "And apparently for your linguistic decorum. I like that one. I'll have to use it."

"Sorry," Sirius says. "I couldn't tell..."

They grin at him. "That's sort of the point, *monsieurmoselle*."

"Oh," Sirius says. "*Oh*. I didn't know you could do that."

"Lots of things you don't know," Claude says, switching to Icelandic briefly to throw a comment at Yí'ān, who bursts out laughing. "Including," they say, in English now, "All the interesting things I have brought for you both. Shall we sit?"

"I've been saving up some good booze for this," Yí'ān says. "Let me call Galina, I'll tell her you're here, and then we get down to business. Sirius, welcome Claude into our humble abode?"

Sirius clears his throat. "Uh, yeah. This way, this is the living room--" All his worldly belongings (the largest volume of it being made up of mostly stolen clothes from Yí'ān and Galina) are piled up around one sofa, which he sits on, and Claude take the other, long, tree-trunk legs stretched out onto the shaggy carpet.

"It's been a year since I was last here," Claude tells him, back in French again. "Yí'ān and I have been friends for almost a decade now, and still, he never invites me over."

"They've been great to me," Sirius says sincerely. He can't stop staring at Claude. They've got a long mane of coarse, black hair and blackish bronze skin, darker than James and Yí'ān. Their skin is weathered and pocked. They're *effortlessly* androgynous, like it's what they were put on this earth to be. There's a strange, unknown thing spreading its wings in Sirius' stomach and taking flight.

Claude doesn't seem to pay their new admirer much mind. "How long have you been in Iceland?" they ask, spinning a

long, thin wand between their fingers.

“Uh,” Sirius says, “Just over a month now? Month and a half, maybe. I’m meant to be in Hogwarts now, but...”

“But Lord Voldemort has got his claws in Great Britain,” Claude says. “I know. Up in the Nordic parts, they can get away with knowing a little less about British politics. Down in France and Belgium, our brand of wizard commie sort of has to stay in the know.”

Sirius laughs despite himself. “*Sorcières le camarade*. I like that one. I’ll have to use it.”

“See to it that you do.” Claude eyes him. “He’s eager to get his hands on you, you know. You must’ve done something to piss him off. Real god complex this one has, doesn’t he? A different sort of... public appeal than Britain’s last major *facho*.”

“I wasn’t alive for the last one,” Sirius admits. “My family liked him, though.”

“Oh?”

“Crazies, the lot of them. Glad to be away from it.”

Claude cracks a smile. “None of us talk to our families out here. You’ll fit right in.”

“Because they’re... like that, too?”

“Some of us.” Claude shrugs. “Others of us were just a touch ahead of the times with our families.” Their eyes flicker to Sirius’ long hair and back to his face. There’s a question in their eyes.

Yí'ān interrupts before Sirius can figure out what that means. "Galina says you owe her fifty francs."

"Yes, well, she owes me ten rubles," Claude says, switching to English. "Does that make us square?"

"Don't make me do conversion rate maths." Yí'ān plops down on the sofa beside Sirius. "I haven't even had a drink yet."

Sirius expects them to get down to business quickly, but Yí'ān and Claude spend the first few hours of the night talking and drinking and catching up with one another. They evidently have a long, long history, switching between Icelandic, Norwegian (which by now, Sirius has gathered is the language spoken at Durmstrang, no kidding, since it's in Norway, he really should have figured that out already) and English. Sirius doesn't learn much about Claude's occupation, or the illicit substances they sell, but he does learn five new French curse words.

Claude tells wild, extravagant stories of distant battles -- of fighting dark wizards on the northern coast of Australia; of cutting supply lines to ex-Soviet AnCap potioneers blockading off towns in Svalbard, Norway; of the battle over an illegally smuggled barrel of unicorn blood that divided wizarding Liechtenstein last year, as the Italian mob, the French *fachiste* state, Belgian counter-imperialists, and a band of halfblood Liechtensteiners duked it out for months over the precious cargo. They've got a brilliant, animated way of talking, hands moving at a mile a minute, face lit up. The world feels so much wider with them in the room.

"You make me miss being out there in the field," Yí'ān tells them enthusiastically. "Galina's made a house-husband out

of me, I swear.”

Claude swigs back the last of their third pint of lager. “As if you wouldn’t have become one anyway. Isn’t she more like your mother?”

“Nah.” Yí’ān wrinkles his nose. “She imprisons me here, Claude. You must rescue me, at once! Before she makes Sirius into a house elf!”

Claude cracks a joke in Norwegian. Yí’ān falls apart laughing. They glow in one another’s company. Sirius takes a sip of his drink to hide his grin. His heart throbs with the lack of James, but it’s felt that way for so long that he can almost ignore how much it sucks.

When, eventually, they get onto the conversation of cargo, it’s already dark outside. Claude cracks open a tall crate of strange bottles on the tabletop in the kitchen, and Sirius peers inside.

“None of them are labeled,” he says, confused.

Claude winks at him. “Only I can see what they are,” they say. “Clever little charm I learned from a black tar dealer I met in Suriname last year. What will you be after, Yí’ān?”

“Depends what you’re offering.” Yí’ān examines the bottles interestedly. “Looks like you’re well-stocked.”

Claude considers their bounty. “Boomslang skin, bursting mushroom -- almost all out of those, since they’re used for fire protection potions and also for getting as high as the human body allows, and everybody needs one of those two things in these times. Wartizome, malaclaw tail, couple of human eyeballs, erumpent horn, griffin claw, got a few

werewolf teeth too. And lots of dittany, too, I assume you are needing some of that?"

"Oh, definitely. Far too cold to grow it ourselves up here. What'll it be going for?"

"Currency?" Claude asks.

"Oh, I get the option? You're too kind to me, truly, I missed you dearly..."

As they start to haggle prices, Sirius peers through the rows of bottles. Some of them have contents that are swirling of their own accord, bouncing around in their jars. He's never seen that before. One particular jar at the very back is more fortified than the others, its bottle apparently triple-walled, caged in with iron webbing and, for good measure, wrapped in a plastic *Intermarché* shopping bag. The contents are pure black, blacker than midnight.

"What's that one at the back?" Sirius asks interestedly.

Claude glances up at him. "That one? Basilisk venom. Rare as anything. Don't look at it too long. Dangerous."

"Who got it?"

"No idea." Claude pops each of their knuckles in and out of place one by one. "Some strange fellow I met in Colmar last year. He wouldn't tell me where he got it. I didn't ask..."

"Huh." Sirius stares at the bottle. He feels distinctly like it should evoke something in him. Like there's something he's not remembering.

It doesn't come to him. Maybe that's the alcohol.

He made the fourth over Easter break of fourth year. By the time he'd finished three, he looked properly different. His eyes were more slitted, darker, the yellow all wide and covering up the whites, and his skin had gone grey and cold. Scaly to the touch. The rituals were doing something to him. He was still... striking. But different. Less like a person, more like a knife.

This time it was a forest in Albania. A tiara, bright and sparkling. His victim this time was a wizard I didn't know. An ex-DADA professor. Only served for a year, years ago now. I don't know what Riddle's... motive was. For all I know, he didn't have one. Suppose he didn't need one, did he?

He does it, and I watch the third death of my life, and I'm screaming like a baby, like a wimp who can't handle it, and Tom laughs at me. His blood hits the tiara and the whole forest lights up white and when I come back to myself, Riddle's on the ground and I can-- I can see

Tom's spine is twisting and writhing and clicking under his skin, distending it outwards grotesquely. The grey flesh leers out from between the ribs, stretching and reddening, so taut Sirius is sure it's going to tear apart.

Riddle lets out a piercing scream, loud enough to shatter the static air. Bird rise shrieking from the trees. Without thinking, Sirius runs to his side, collapsing onto his knees there, and Riddle contorts backwards, head snapping back against his neck so far it doesn't seem human. His ribs ripple outwards like they're going to fold out of his chest.

"Sirius," he groans, voice rasping out of the front of his throat. "You watch..." He screams again and just as quickly,

stops, wrangling the sharp, terrible cry inside his throat and turning his slitted yellow eyes back to Sirius' face. All the bones in his neck crack. "And you learn..."

Claude is there when Sirius wakes up this time, choking on a shout as he topples off the sofa. They don't try to approach, just watching Sirius with soft, imperturbable eyes.

"Sorry," Sirius gasps. He swears violently. "I'm okay. I'm okay. Sorry."

"Do not apologise." Claude stands silently, leaving the room.

Sirius' back finds the front of the sofa and he presses against it just to hold himself together, some large, angry part of him scared his back will start to twist and contort, too. The floor seems to sway like the belly of a heavy-laden ship. He buries his face in his hands and tries to remove the image of it from his head. *You watch and you learn.*

Claude reenters. They hand Sirius a glass of water, then take their place on the other sofa again. "We all have nightmares," they say. "There is no shame in it."

"I didn't mean to wake you."

"I would have woken anyway." Claude cracks a smile. "We tend to do that, most days."

And it's true. Outside, dawn is already starting to rise. "Oh."

Claude eyes him for a moment. "It must be quite bad," they say. "In Britain. To warrant such fear. Iceland, of all places."

"I needed somewhere I could run to, and quickly," Sirius says. He sips his water again, liquid splashing up over the rim with how violently his hands are trembling. "I'd been... I'd been captive for a year. More than a year. If I didn't get out then..."

He trails off. Claude watches him with their piercing, questioning eyes.

"We've heard rumours," they say, in stalling French. "Rumours of old magic. *Bad* magic."

"I can't talk about it."

"You don't have to." Claude glances out of the window. Out past the city and far away. "But if you ever need to talk to anybody who could help you to understand, I know a lot of very smart *sorcières* out there. Just give Galina the word."

"I don't know if anybody can help with this," Sirius admits. "If anybody finds out..." He trails off. "It's important that nobody knows. Nobody except me."

"You intend to die with the secret?"

"I intend to kill the secret myself."

"You're sixteen."

"Almost seventeen."

Claude laughs without any humour at all. "If you think war spares the young, I have some unfortunate news for you, Sirius Black."

"But they wouldn't be able to help," Sirius defends. A lump grows in his throat and he swallows it down like poison.

"Nobody can help. I was the only one he ever told, and that makes me the only one that should ever know, because if other people do, they could... they could..."

"They could fight your war for you?"

"No. They could make their own."

Claude nods interestedly. "I see."

"No you don't. You don't see anything." Sirius scrubs his face. "*Fuck.*"

Claude gets up and kneels down in front of him. Their piercing, black eyes stare right into his soul. "The sooner you learn to trust us," they say gently. "The better we can help you. The lesson children learn at war should not be that they can't trust their friends." They smile a little. "The lesson they should learn is that wars are won by people, not armies. And we might not have any of the second, but we have plenty of the first."

Sirius can't find anything to say to that. "Oh."

"I'll be on my way in the morning." Claude lies back on their sofa. "If you need me, Galina can get you in contact with me. It was good to meet you, *monsieurmoselle.*"

He was four in, then. Locket, ring, diary, diadem. That's what he called it. A diadem. I saw that word on the side of a shipping truck leaving the city the other day and had a bloody panic attack. Pathetic, right?

So I went back to school. Remus could tell I was snapping into millions of tiny little pieces and he did his best to hold the bits of me together, and only half succeeded. You discovered drugs that term, remember? Sitting out on the ledge outside our window smoking pot with you was the only time I really felt like I existed in those last few months of fourth year. Hard to believe it was a year and a half ago. It feels like it was yesterday, watching you cough on weed smoke and laughing as it came out of your nose like a dragon. I would remember that time a lot when I was at Rosier Manor. It helped.

The last time I saw you all was that final day of that year, on the train. I think a part of me knew, even then, that I wouldn't be coming back. You gave me this great big hug on the platform and told me to stay safe, and Remus looked at me with this LOOK I'll never forget. We'd argued earlier that day about me. He wanted me to come back to Wales with him. I didn't want him to die. I hope he's not still angry at me. I know it's stupid to think he is, but... I can be a right bastard when I want to be. I'm sure I said something awful and irreparable that I can't take back.

And then you were both gone, and that evening, like clockwork, Riddle came to get me from Grimmauld, and he took me to a rocky cliffside in the highlands, lighthouse blinking in the distance, and like I'd done before, I sat down and I watched and I said nothing as he killed a muggleborn in front of me. She had red hair and all I could see when I looked at her was Evans. I've never hated myself more than I did then. You're never going to forgive me when you read these, James. I don't think I'll ever forgive myself.

And once the whole awful thing was done, Riddle crawls to me, hair coming out in clumps -- bits of his eyebrows and

flakes of skin all down his face, chunks of his hair falling into my lap -- and

"I'm proud of you," Riddle murmurs. His grey hand snaps up Sirius' wrist. They breathe in the same air. Over the side of the rocky cliff, waves crash against the shore, and the night sky above swirls with the beginnings of a storm.

"You are?" Sirius asks. It comes out like a dry sob.

Riddle nods. He squeezes, on the edge of painful. Sirius feels his bones creak. "You've been strong. Strong enough to honor your blood. Suffering made me stronger, when I was your age. Now, it will mould you, too."

Sirius stares up into the clouds. He can taste blood. *Save me. Save me. Somebody, please fucking get me out of here.*

Riddle's free hand ghosts down the side of Sirius' face. The tips of his fingers are bloody. They leave a sticky trail like war paint. "I know how this hurts you. Strong though you are, you are still soft-hearted and weak. I was, too, once."

"You were?" Sirius asks.

Riddle grips his chin. "I was. But the world changed me. I grew outside of myself. I see it in you, now, too--" His yellow eyes flash. "You're changing, too."

"I don't want to change," Sirius whispers.

"Sometimes, we don't have a choice."

"You could forget me. Let me go home. Find somebody else," Sirius offers.

“Why would I, when I’ve found you to be perfect for the job?”

Perfect. The sour taste of bile flowers in the back of his mouth. “I don’t want this.”

The grip tightens. For a terrifying moment, Sirius is sure Tom is going to snap his jaw in his pale, cold hand. “But I do. And you answer to me. Until you are old and strong and pure enough to answer to yourself, you answer to me. You learn from me. You grow.”

“And if I don’t want the world you want?”

Riddle laughs. It’s a high sound for his voice, the cadence changed. “You expect me to believe that? Sirius, you know as well as I do that if you want a new world, you have to build it yourself. You know as well as I that magic, for as perfect as it is, as wonderful, needs protection. Preservation. Heritage.”

“I’ve got friends. Friends who are muggleborn. Friends who are half-breeds.”

“But they’re not your friends.” That hand shifts to gather a handful of flesh at the back of Sirius’ neck, digging in. Riddle’s sharp teeth glint in the dim light. “They don’t understand you. Not like I do.”

Involuntarily, Sirius thinks of James, of Peter. How neither of them noticed. How neither of them seemed to care. Of Remus’ fierce anger.

“Get out of my head, Tom,” he snaps.

Riddle shakes his head. “I wasn’t in it. Whoever hurt you, the pain is yours alone. I would only ask whether you want

to be hurt again.”

“They would care,” Sirius says desperately. “If they knew. They would care. They would come here and... and...”

Unbidden, rushing thoughts. James, safe and comfortable in the Potters’ house in Godric’s Hollow. Peter, tucked into bed in his mother’s apartment, dead to the world. Remus, telling Sirius during their fight only this morning, *sometimes you act as though you’re the only person in the world who matters, Sirius, you know that?* Regulus, comfortable as the spare. Less hated. Less hurt.

“And?” Riddle asks, almost mocking. “They’re not here now, are they?”

Hand snapping out, he grabs a fistful of Sirius’ hair and yanks hard. Sirius rolls with the motion like he was born to spend his life fighting, trying to hook his legs up over Riddle’s hip, and they wrestle for a moment. Riddle gets the upper hand, forcing Sirius down onto his front on the sharp rocks, and drags him to the cliff’s edge by his shirt. The rocks recede and a wide, dark universe opens up under him. For a dizzying moment, the black, churning ocean below lurches up at Sirius and he hangs, suspended, over open air. Magic curls its tendrils around him and he dangles there.

“Are they coming to get you?!” Riddle demands. Sirius yells wordlessly, levitated up into the air by his feet, hair dangling around his face, whipped up by the northern winds. “Well, Sirius?!”

“Fuck you!” Sirius hurls at him. The words are lost on the roar of the storm. “Drop me, then! See if I care! Like I haven’t wanted to die since you first walked into Grimmauld Place two years ago--”

The tendrils of magic let him go. Sirius screams, falling through the whipping wind, and the rocks lunge up towards him. He closes his eyes against the blistering cold and waits for death.

But Riddle's wild, untamed magic snares him inches from the cliffs, dragging Sirius like a ragdoll up through the storm and atop the cliffside again, where he hovers, arms and legs spread wide, in the air in front of Riddle.

Rain lashes down around them. As thunder rumbles, a flash of lightning into the ocean behind Riddle lights him up around his edges, an outline of bright white misery.

"If any of them cared about you," Riddle hisses, and now he truly does look inhuman. The last flaky pieces of hair he has whip around his head. "They would have done everything to keep you safe. They would have come. Wouldn't you have, for them?"

Sirius can't find the words to answer. Rain and sleet and hail lash at his face, the colour and flavour of judgement.

"Or are you truly not the friend you thought you were?" Riddle sneers.

He drops Sirius. Sirius hits the ground and crumples, and Riddle leaves him lying there in the howling wind, in the bitter storm.

This time, when Sirius comes to, he doesn't shout. His face is wet with cold sweat, but he's silent, curled into tiny ball on the sofa, wrapped in one of Galina's coarse, knitted sweaters.

From outside the door to the living room, golden light streams in under the crack. Soft voices drift through the wall.

“Be safe,” she’s saying. “He’ll miss you.”

“I know,” Yí’ān’s voice says softly. “But I can’t wait much longer, not with that distress call, and I don’t want to wake him up. Tell him I said bye, okay?”

“You’re sure you want to take this one?”

Yí’ān pauses. “It’s home, isn’t it?” he says wistfully. “If somebody in Scotland needs help, I’ve sort of got to me the one to take it.”

“Only if you want to.”

“I do.”

“Okay,” Galina says simply. “I’ll hold down the fort. The castle.”

“Muggle sayings,” Yí’ān laughs breathlessly. Somebody moves. Yí’ān’s voice is muffled as he says, “Small wars. Small wars.”

Sirius gets the impression they’re hugging.

“Small wars,” Galina agrees. “Now. Go.”

And so I went to Dumbledore, and I told him everything. Dumbledore heard me out, and he nodded and made notes, and then he sent me home again. Just like that. To this day, I don't know what he was thinking. Guess I'll never know.

I can't go into detail about my time in Rosier Manor. I just can't. But here are the things you should know: Riddle knew, the moment I told Dumbledore. He was waiting for me, back at Grimmauld. He didn't say one word to me. Just lit up the floo and tossed me right into the fire.

I was there for a year and a month. They didn't hurt me, if that's what you're wondering, not in the ways that count. It was lonely, more than anything else. Tom came to visit occasionally, once every few months. He made his seventh (sixth, if you don't count himself) alone. A great snake that tried to throttle me the first time I saw it. I imagined the lot of you were worried about me. It was a fucked up cope, but... well. Maybe you all were.

And I can't go into details, I can't. But yeah.

You came to get me. I don't think I knew what love was until then, looking at you across the hallway above the cellar.

The apartment without Yí'ān isn't the same.

Maybe it's just because he reminded Sirius of James, but not having him around makes everything heavier. It feels less like a sanctuary and more like a wartime trench. Galina sets Sirius to work at their communications desk in the converted second bedroom, perched in a creaky desk chair over a table of various radios, muggle telephones and transmitters, noting down messages from all over the wizarding world.

Some of the contraptions are wizarding (like a sheet of paper that fills itself every hour with the movements of different wizarding pirate ships through the Atlantic, noting their coordinates; and a whirring, spinning ball of

electricity in a jar that glows red whenever it senses a muggle death by magical means in the surrounding thousand square miles) and some are muggle (like the telephones, always babbling with strange languages and frantic shouts that Sirius has to pass off to Galina for her to translate), but most are somewhere in the middle (like the cloudy crystal ball in the centre of the table that flashes morse code as it notes the movements of the American muggle military).

It's brilliant. Sirius loves magic. He also despises it, because as well as being wonderful, it's very lonely.

Galina rushes in and out. She spends the odd night sleeping in the other bedroom, but most evenings she's on the move, apparating from crisis to conflict around wizarding Europe. There's a mob coup going down in Southern Italy, involving the muggle mafia and a gang wizarding drug smugglers. The fascist maniac wizarding dictator of Luxembourg is trying to assimilate southern Belgium. Small wars, indeed.

Whatever Yí'ān ran off to do (something to do with a distress call in Scotland), he isn't back within a week, and by that point, Sirius is properly worried. When he tells Galina, she doesn't seem concerned.

"I've taught him well, he knows how to stay alive," she waves him off. "Now, back to work with you. I want that whole letter from the magical president of Cyprus transcribed by the end of the day. Use the translator at the back of the shelf, the blue one. It's charmed not to waste as much ink."

For all that being an antifascist rebel is great, and Sirius is glad to be doing it (at the very least it serves as a good

distraction), it isn't quite as grand and adventurous as he would like.

At the very least, Galina has promised him more exciting work once they can figure out a way around the Trace. Which, doesn't that sound bloody wonderful right now.

On the tenth day since he left, as September rolls into its grave, a letter from Yí'ān arrives.

Galina is taking a rare nap when the owl swoops in through an open window, sleeping on her stomach in the other bedroom. The owl makes for Sirius instead, who is making his fifth cup of tea of the day in the kitchen, perching on his shoulder and holding out its leg.

"Ah," Sirius says, putting down the milk bottle. "Thanks."

The owl tweets in his ear and takes off out of the window. Inside, the letter is short and very simple.

Rebel mother + black puppy,

44218FM. 8PM, TUE. 'Horace'.

Cheers!

- Scotsman.

"Galina?" Sirius calls. "Galina! Come look at this!"

A momentary pause. Then, Galina shuffles into the kitchen, rubbing her face. "My old bones," she says, "Are not made to put up with you young people. What is it?"

"Yí'ān wrote," Sirius says. He shoves the letter at her. "Today's Tuesday, right? D'you reckon he means eight, like, eight British time? Or..."

He trails off. Galina has already crossed the room and slipped out of the door. She returns moments later with one of her dozens of muggle radios in her hands, setting it down on the kitchen table and flicking it on at the back. Then, she gets to work twiddling the dial onto the right frequency.

"Sit," she tells Sirius, not quite severe, but not soft enough that Sirius can argue with it.

"Yes, boss," he murmurs, and takes a seat perpendicular to her at the table, setting his tea down in front of him.

Galina gets to tapping, trying to find the right rhythm against the top of the plastic contraption with her long, willowy wand. When she's punched in the password -- 'Horace' like Slughorn? Sirius wonders -- she sits back in her chair, staring at the radio like she's trying to will it into sound.

"If it is British time," she says, "We should have another hour. Back to work, you."

"But--"

Galina quirks a smile. "But?"

"But nothing," Sirius agrees. "On it, boss."

"I never told you to call me boss."

"I like it. Makes me feel like I've got a real job," Sirius jokes, leaving his tea for her to finish as he makes his way back to the communications desk.

An hour later finds him and Galina gathered together around the radio again. Wind whips up against the high windows of the basement apartment, and the radio crackles

with static. Wordlessly, Sirius makes them both tea. Then, they wait.

Eight. Eight-fifteen. Eight-thirty. The clock on the wall ticks ominously loudly. Sirius had been excited when the letter first arrived, mostly just because it confirmed that Yí'ān was alive. Now, foreboding grows in his stomach, leaping like a jungle frog.

"He might have meant eight our time," Sirius starts.

Suddenly, the radio blares to life. Sirius flinches. Galina doesn't even startle.

"Apologies for the late start, folks!" says a female voice Sirius vaguely recognises, though he can't place it. "We've had some light trouble with some Auror types, you all know how things go. Luckily, our location has not been compromised, and we're good to go!"

"And a good thing, too!" joins in a male voice. "Since tonight, we're joined by a very special guest. But before we get into that..."

"For any new listeners," the woman takes over again, "Welcome one and all to the fifth weekly broadcast of *Direct Action*, your number one source on all things magical Britain that the Prophet doesn't want you to hear about. As always, I am your host Gambit--"

"And I'm your co-host Lyric, the far more attractive one--"

A faint noise of impact and some laughter in the background. "And as always!" Gambit takes over again, "We are going to start with the unpleasant stuff first, get it out of the way before we bless you all with a wonderful new

guest, who surely brings bright, uplifting news. Alright, Lyric, if you will."

"Not too many new deaths this week, comparatively," Lyric says. "And thank goodness for that, I suppose. As many of you know, since this one actually made the Prophet, Horace Slughorn's body has been found in a suburb of Greater London. The best potions master Hogwarts has had in recent memory, he will be greatly missed."

Sirius' heart throbs. He sits back in his seat. A part of him wants to turn the radio off, not to listen to any more, but a louder, hungrier bit of him wants to turn the volume louder.

"As well as that," Lyric carries on, "We've had it confirmed that Ministry worker Fennel Staghart has been killed on his commute home, by unknown magical means. We don't know much, but from the reports, we suspect the killing curse. Our deepest condolences, as always, to his family."

"That's all our deaths for this week, thankfully," Gambit takes over. "As for new missing persons, Verda Pertinger, a Canadian-born robe seamstress based in Scotland, has been reported missing by her family. At the moment, her connection to the conflict is, as of yet, unknown. Her story hasn't made it to the Prophet, though, so I suppose most of us can make a well-reasoned guess."

"We've also had it confirmed that Rubeus Hagrid is alive and well," Lyric exclaims. Sirius breathes a long sigh of relief. "Based in mainland Europe, he's alive and kicking, and thank Merlin for that. Most of us miss him quite dearly, but here's to hoping we'll see his great lovely face again soon, I suppose."

"Right," Gambit agrees. "Still no word on the Black brothers, especially not our undesirable number one..."

Galina elbows Sirius in the ribs. She catches his eye and grins. Tentatively, he smiles back.

"And that brings us onto our lovely young guest!" Lyric says. "If you'd like to introduce yourself, Antlers..."

Antlers. Sirius feels his body freeze up.

"Hi," James Potter's wonderful voice says cautiously, slightly too close to his microphone. "I'm Antlers -- or, that's what I'm going by here -- and I'm very happy to be here. Uh. I lead another resistance group. We're called Padfoot's Army."

Sirius slumps against the back of his chair. "Oh," he says softly.

"You know him?" Galina asks.

Sirius nods. "That's James," he murmurs. "That's my best friend."

I miss you like a limb, is what I'm saying. And I'm sorry. And I'm tired. And I'm going to kill Tom Riddle.

"We started up after Sirius disappeared," James explains. "He was my best friend, and it sort of made us all realise that this really was going to be a war. So we had to do something. We gave duelling lessons to other kids who knew a war was coming, who wanted to fight on the right side. We know lots of them haven't gone back to Hogwarts - - that they're in hiding, like us -- and we want to find them. We want to start recruiting again. Haha. Like the, y'know. The paint said."

“The graffiti was genius,” Lyric says, laughing. “When we saw it-- it lifted all our spirits, it really did. Graffitiing the inside of the Ministry atrium with muggle spray paint... ingenious. Truly.”

“Thanks,” James says. Sirius can hear the grin in his voice. “It helped us to let off some steam, too. Me and the other leaders.”

“They’re here with us right now, in fact.”

James laughs. “They’re waving at us through the glass recording booth wall. What were the code names for them? Lykos and Red.”

Remus and Evans. Evans, of all people. She’s alive. Sirius’ face burns and he forces himself to keep paying attention. He can have a great, dramatic, trembling breakdown later, and it’ll be fantastic, bright like a storm, but for now, he anchors himself, so as to not float away on the churning ocean.

“The three of you represent the sort of vibe we’re going for at the Friends of London,” Gambit says modestly. “Young rebels like yourselves, fighting for what’s right.”

“We’ve not done much fighting yet,” James admits. “If you don’t count those two guards.”

“Which of you was that?” Lyric asks.

“Me,” James says bashfully. “I had the element of surprise, though. I wore muggle nightclub clothes-- it’s a long story.”

“You’ll have to tell us later,” Gambit says. “What are you and your group’s plans, Antlers?”

"We've got a lot of them." James clears his throat. "We want to connect with other resistance groups in the area, and we want to do so soon. We want to get the old lot back together, too -- start properly rebuilding Padfoot's Army. Uh, we want to keep the morale up. Keep looking for Sirius. We know he's out there."

"Surely, if he's made it this long," Lyric agrees. "The most wanted person in wizarding Britain."

"He's wonderful," James says. Sirius gives up his effort not to break down, folding his shaking hands over his face and sucking in sharp breaths through his fingers. "He's wonderful, and he's fighting so, so hard to take you-know-who down. Harder than any of us. And we're going to find him, if it's the last thing we do."

"Do you have anything to say to him, if he's listening?"

"Pads," James says immediately, like he doesn't have to stop and think about it. "You're not alone. You never have been. We're getting you back, and we're winning this war. All over wizarding Britain, people are standing behind you. Fighting to take him down like you did. No more secrets, okay? We're gonna find you, and there'll be no more secrets. I love you."

Galina drops an arm around him. Sirius shakes until he thinks he'll shake out of himself. "Oh," he says again.

"You're very loved," Galina observes simply. Like it should have been obvious to him.

"I guess I am," Sirius whispers.

I'm going to finish this letter and tuck it and the others into an envelope and seal it, now, so I don't go insane. But these are some important things:

- *Tell Remus I love him, so much, and I'm so sorry*
- Tell Pete I hope he's okay, and I'm sorry I was a bad friend
- Tell Mr. and Mrs. Potter I'm okay
- Tell Reg (if you see him, he's at Durmstrang now) that I wish I'd been a better brother
- Remember how sorry I am. And if you never want to speak to me again I don't blame you. But I'm sorry.

I love you. I hope that's enough.

Yours, then and now,

- S.O.B

That night, as she comes in to wish him goodnight, Sirius curled up under a blanket and Galina sitting beside him on the sofa, he stops her from going.

"One sec," he tells her. "I just... I had a question. A request, actually."

Interestedly, Galina raises an eyebrow at him. "Yeah?"

"I..." Sirius swallows. "I wanted you to call Claude. If you can. They made me an offer and I want to take them up on it."

Galina's face breaks into one of her crafty, fox-like grins. "Funny you'd mention it," she says. "I wanted to talk to you about something a friend of mine has told me about the Trace. And I rather think somebody like Claude could lend a hand."

Chapter End Notes

- [Official Tumblr](#)
- [Twitter Quotes Bot](#) (admin: [lupinlesbian](#))
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THE ORDER

Chapter Notes

im like,,, two seconds away from changing the name of this fic from 'they say they saw him with a gun' to 'James Potter's Delivery Service for Runaway Blood Traitors'. not even a joke. i might have even done it by the time u read this.

enjoy! tws for light discrimination

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Alastor Moody is a few inches shorter than James, which makes him a whole head shorter than Remus, who towers over the both of them. Even Lily beats out the mangled old auror by an inch or so.

That does not change the fact that Remus is *utterly* terrified of the man.

He's got this electric sort of presence to him as he stalks back and forth in front of the single window, like at any moment sparks might start jumping off him, bouncing from the soles of his iron-toed boots. He's forsaken traditional wizarding robes for more mugglelish attire -- a heavy, brown leather jacket that Sirius would have loved, patched muggle trousers that would look better suited to a soldier, and a shotgun holstered at his hip. His magical eye spins ominously over the three of them, taking them all in all at once, like it can't afford to take its gaze from them for even a moment. Remus suspects that it's still watching them even when the man turns away to pace back the other way.

“So you’re telling me,” Moody says, in a voice that is very nearly a growl. “That *John Lupin*, of all people, has a werewolf for a kid? Jesus God, son, it’s almost poetic. And he’s still got his job?”

“He kicked us out,” James says sullenly. He’s been answering most of the questions since they arrived at the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix. He’s good at that sort of thing. Lily is stuck to Remus’ side like velcro, staring around with wide, curious eyes. Remus wants to sink down into a hole in the floor and never get out.

“When?”

“A few weeks ago.” James raises his chin defiantly. “That’s when we came to London. We’ve been doing fine on our own, sir. We don’t need help.”

“If you didn’t need help, you wouldn’t be here,” Moody waves him off. He stalks back to the other end of the room, then whirls on his heel. “You. Lupin.”

“Yes?” Remus asks, terrified for a moment that Moody is going to have him thrown out.

“How have you been handling the moons? Got an old basement somewhere to hide?”

“Uh, no, sir.” Remus swallows hard and exchanges a glance with James. “We travel out of the city. It’s always safe. I’ve never hurt anyone.”

“And Dumbledore knew you were...?”

“Yes. I didn’t want to go to Hogwarts initially,” Remus says, ignoring how James stiffens at his side. “But he told me he would do everything in his power to protect not only the

other students, but me, too. He promised. And he's kept to his word."

"And how do you know you won't attack some poor muggle sod next week?" Moody asks.

"This is really off the topic," James snaps. "Sir, we're meant to be here to talk about the war--"

Moody rounds on him. "How many werewolves do you think the Dark Lord has in his employ, Potter? Because I can assure you, it's not just pureblooded freaks who follow him. For all you know--"

James' warm hand grabs Remus' arm below the elbow and squeezes tight. "If you're going to keep accusing our friend," he says coldly, "We'll leave. We don't need you. We can survive just fine on our own."

"I do believe he's right," says a voice from the doorway. All three teens jump, and Remus peers around Lily to see...

"Professor!" James yelps, jumping to his feet. "Professor, what's--"

McGonagall smiles at them all, though there is no warmth to it. "Hello, Potter. Sit, will you? We've lots to discuss. And, Alastor, if I may, I can personally vouch for Lupin. He's trustworthy."

Remus' heart soars. "Thanks, pr'fessor," he mumbles.

Grumbling, Moody turns away, going back to pacing. "Don't hover, Minerva. Explain the situation to them, will you?"

"Yeah," James speaks up, as he takes his seat at Remus' side again. "We've been here two hours, professor, and

nobody's told us anything. It took ages to convince the Friends to even let us come--"

"Then the Friends of London had the right idea," McGonagall says. The familiar severity returns to her face. It feels a little bit like being at school again as she crosses the room to stand before all of them. "You really shouldn't be here, you three."

"And why not?" James retorts. "We've survived fine on our own--"

"By sheer, dumb luck, I'm sure." McGonagall stares imperiously down at him. "Potter, you're sixteen."

"And?"

"And this is a war, not a children's game--"

"We know it's a war, professor," Lily says, speaking for the first time in a while. She looks from the ground to McGonagall's face, then back down. "We've all had to leave our families. They killed James'."

James stiffens and his face goes cold. "Yeah, professor. And they've got Sirius."

"And it is not your job to *rescue* him, Potter," McGonagall starts.

"None of you are doing it!" James shouts. He's on his feet again. "A year, he was locked up in that bloody cellar, and none of you did anything. He was *alone*. I had to get him out. Me."

For the first time, McGonagall looks taken off-balance. "I believe you'll find that was Andromeda Black, Mr. Potter--"

"I went with her. Polyjuice." James' back is so taut with tension, his face so rife with fury, that he might as well be a forest fire, a hurricane on a dusty morning. Anything except a teenage boy. "I was there, professor, and I got him out, and I watched Dumbledore die. Andromeda, too. Didn't Gideon tell you?"

"Mr. Prewett," McGonagall tells him stiffly, "Has been missing for over two months. Since the wedding, in fact."

James' face pales. "Right," he says. "We heard it on *Direct Action*. Sorry about that."

"We are not in need of your apologies, Potter," McGonagall says. Her face breaks and for a moment, she looks so terrible worn-down that she's not quite the same person anymore. "We need you -- all three of you -- to hide. Get out of this while you can. You're not even of age-- you should be in school--"

"You think we'd do well at school?" Remus demands. "A werewolf, a muggleborn and a blood traitor, leaders of Padfoot's Army, friends of Sirius Black?"

"Mr. Pettigrew--"

"Of course Peter's fine," James dismisses angrily. "You don't need to tell us that. He's good at surviving. You know what he's like."

Professor McGonagall purses her lips. "In good conscience, I cannot allow you three to throw your lives away."

"And if we're not looking for permission?"

"Then I cannot aid you in it."

“What do you expect us to do?” James asks. “Leave Sirius out there to die? Hear on *Direct Action* one day that he’s dead, never get to tell him...” He trials off.

Remus takes over, because he feels like he needs to. “This war hurts all of us as much as it hurts all of you. They’d kill us if they could. They’re not going to want to kill us more just because we’re causing trouble for them.” It’s not quite the truth, and they all know it. Putting targets on their own backs isn’t exactly keeping them safe. But James nods furiously.

“Exactly,” he says. “And you were the one who told me, Professor, that they’d gotten my family. You know what they’d do to me. Especially now that we’re looking for Pads.”

“And we’ve done fine on our own,” Lily says. “Professor, we’ve been safe. Even without magic, we’re good at staying alive. We’ve got plans-- plans for what we want to do. Plans on how to help.”

“Such as?” McGonagall asks, folding her arms at them all.

James juts his chin out. “We want to set up a muggle mailing service,” he says. “A network to keep in contact with students still at Hogwarts, to get information. With your help, we could do it. And we want to find other kids who haven’t gone back, who have had to leave their families. We want to take them in. They can help us, or we can get them to safety, somewhere they won’t be found, until the war’s over...”

“And when do you estimate this war will be over?”

“When Sirius finds a way to end it,” James says promptly.

McGonagall and Moody exchange long, exasperated looks. McGonagall turns back to James. "Potter... it's evident you've quite a lot of *faith* in Black, but..."

"But?" James asks. "He was the one who gave Dumbledore his information about you-know who-- Sirius figured out his greatest weakness, all on his own, and it was so important that--"

"I know." McGonagall clears her throat. "I am aware, Potter, of Albus Dumbledore's political affiliation with Black. But heavens above, do you even know what great weakness this is? As far as any of us know, Professor Dumbledore never told anybody. Has Black been in contact with you?"

"Not yet," James says, deflating a little. "But we're going to find him. I swear. If he'll reveal himself to anybody, it'll be me."

Remus' heart pangs a little at that. He doesn't argue. No point.

"And if anybody can take him down," James carries on, "It'll be the one person alive who knows."

"Potter..."

"Professor."

McGonagall stares at him for a moment. "You cannot seriously expect us to allow the fate of this war to rest on the shoulders of a teenage boy? An underage child?"

"No," James says. "Keep fighting the war you're fighting. But let us join too, Professor. We can help. And when we find him... even if he can't end this, you've got nothing to lose, right?"

And it's true, Remus considers. McGonagall has nothing to lose but her pride at this point. She won't be headmistress for long (she'll be dismissed by the end of the year, one of the Friends told them a few days ago). All she has is this rebellion and Professor Dumbledore's legacy on her shoulders. The weight of it must be immense.

"We've got your lives to lose," she says eventually.

"It's not your choice whether we give them up," Lily says. "We've already made that decision."

Had they? Remus can't pinpoint a moment when they all swore themselves to the cause, but it must have happened at some point, because he knows for sure now that all of them are willing to die for this. There isn't a question in his mind about that.

"We have," James agrees. "Right, Remus?"

"Of course," Remus agrees. "Soon we'll be of age anyway, and then there's nothing you can do about it. No reasonable excuse to keep us out. You might as well help us now. Then, you'll be way less likely to hear on *Direct Action* that we've been offed somehow. If we've got your support. The Order, I mean."

It's a cruel tactic and McGonagall doesn't seem to appreciate it. Her face flickers, multiple emotions jumping across it. Eventually, she says, "You'll stay here, at headquarters--"

"No!" James, Lily and Remus all say at once.

"We've got other arrangements," Lily says quickly. "We're staying an independent group, professor."

“And where might those be?”

They exchange glances, the three of them. After a moment, James says, “We’re with the Friends. Only for now. They’re sourcing us an apartment to work out of. Somewhere we can offer shelter to other ex-students and Hogwarts dropouts and the like. We’re restarting Padfoot’s Army.”

“And the Friends of London can afford this?”

“One of ‘em’s a blood traitor with a rich family,” James says. “Just came into a big inheritance. He’s using it to help the war effort.”

“I see,” McGonagall says stiffly. “There will be rules. None of you will be permitted to engage in any active combat with any of the Dark Lord’s forces until you’re all of age.”

James opens his mouth to argue. Remus kicks him in the shin, and when James looks over, tries to say with his eyes, *all things being well, we shouldn’t need to. Just go with it.*

James sighs. *Fine.*

“Sure,” he says, turning back to McGonagall. “What else?”

“You’ll check in weekly with the Order. If medical attention is needed, for any of you, you will report to us. If your location is compromised, you will relocate to an Order safehouse outside of the city.”

“Minerva,” Moody starts, face red like a beet.

She shushes him with a bare glance. “In case you had forgotten, Alastor, Albus left *me* in charge of the Order, not you.” She turns her sharp gaze back to James. “You will

inform us of each 'Hogwarts dropout' you take in who is not yet of age."

"Okay," James agrees. "We can do that."

McGonagall looks at Remus. "What is the current arrangement for full moons, Lupin?"

"James and I travel out of the city," Remus says stiffly. "It's all been smooth going."

McGonagall raises an eyebrow, so domineering that Remus sort of wants to find a piece of furniture to hide behind. "And you're sure this is safe?"

"As sure as we can be of anything, professor."

"If anything -- *anything* -- goes wrong, you report it to the Order immediately. Understood?"

"Yes, Professor," Remus mumbles, staring at the ground as he feels his face flush. He hasn't hurt a muggle in his life, nor a wizard, if you don't count scratches and grazes the Marauders have sustained. Here, being dressed down in front of his friends, he sort of feels like a criminal anyway.

James evidently doesn't like it much, either. "Can you stop treating him like he's some bloody animal?" he snaps.

"Remus being a werewolf has *nothing* to do with any of this. We're handling it just fine. Nothing's gone wrong and nothing's going to."

"Potter, we are simply providing precautions," McGonagall says, sounding on the edge of snapping at him, "to ensure such does not change. Do you understand?"

"You can do that without pathologising him--"

Remus wonders in the back of his mind where James learned that word. "James," he says. "James, it's fine. Let's just move on."

"We have conditions, too," Lily speaks up.

"Which are?" McGonagall inquires.

"We want to sit in on Order meetings, when we can," Lily starts. "And any information any of you receive on Sirius, or any other Hogwarts student or ex-student, we want to know. That includes Regulus Black."

McGonagall purses her lips. "These are extraordinarily presumptuous things to ask of us, Evans..."

"If you can't make good on them, we're leaving," Lily says simply. "And you can forget we were ever here." She smiles very slightly, and it makes her look very calculating indeed. "What are you going to do? Ban us from trips to Hogsmede?"

Looking reinvigorated, James nods. "You can't exactly dock house points now, professor. She's right."

"Especially since you won't be headmistress for much longer before they fire you or try to kill you," Remus adds. "Professor."

McGonagall glances between all of them. She clicks her tongue against the back of her teeth. "Lupin, Evans, quite frankly I'm very disappointed in both of you."

"Not me, professor?" James asks cheekily.

Sighing, McGonagall shakes her head. "Not you, Potter. No."

Sirius,

The Order of the Phoenix agreed to our conditions! With a few of their own, that is. We have to check in with them if anything goes wrong, and we have to keep them updated on stuff we're doing. James has already said he's completely willing to keep stuff from them, and Lily agrees, so I suppose we're not going to be entirely honest with them unless we want to.

McGonagall looks very stressed. Not just by us, either, which is a change from the school days, I suppose. Hogwarts must be... well. It must suck right now. Bloody hell, I hope Peter goes home for Christmas and doesn't go back. I can't stop imagining him sitting alone in that dorm. Only him left.

Snape's still there, as are most purebloods we know. The Friends told us a nasty story the other day about what they did to Dorcas Meadows when she went back. Peter's halfblood, but not many people know, so I suppose he's survived on claims of pure heritage. Meadows probably couldn't hide that she's halfblood (and her mother's a muggleborn too, which is even worse), and apparently they kicked her out of half of her NEWT classes. Claimed she cheated on all her OWLs. I dunno if she's still at Hogwarts. If she is, I suppose she's got a pretty empty schedule.

The Order are... well. They're cooped up in an old house in North London. They're mostly older folks. Ex-aurors and the like. People who fought in the last war, or who have been fighting death eaters and Dark wizards for some of their lives, anyway. They're tense and don't trust anybody. Like proper rebellion soldiers. They made us all prove our identities about five times before they even let us in, and

that was after the Friends had owed them ahead of time to let them know we were coming. Even now, they don't trust us.

McGongall agreed to let us come along to their next meeting, though! It's on Friday. So that's a win, I suppose.

We're back with the Friends in East London now. Near where your old place is, actually. James reckons if he stands on the windowsill, he can see that big church spire on the end of Grimmauld Place. He wants to go down there. I don't know what he expects to find. I'm a hypocrite, though, because I sort of want to go down there, too.

Sorry I've been writing a little less. It's been hectic. Between the ministry graffiti scheme and moving in with the Friends, and planning for this new insane mailing system James wants to set up, we've been swept off our feet. I'm writing this while the three of us take a break from mapping out all the nearest postal offices, actually. James and Lily both told me to tell you they said hi, so. There you go.

Can't stop wondering whether you heard James on 'Direct Action' last week. It would be amazing if you had, but I doubt it. If you did: he meant every word of it. He loves you. So do I. And wasn't he bloody amazing? Every word, like he'd planned it. He hadn't. After they were done airing, he looked like he was going to cry.

Stay safe out there,

Remus.

The Friends of London are a cheerful, lively lot: everything the Order of the Phoenix aren't. Mostly recent graduates

and a handful of laid-off or otherwise unemployed twenty-somethings, they all seem quite aware of their precarious standing with the law, and also quite willing to ignore it in favour of boldness. *Direct Action* isn't their only scheme.

"Angel should be back this week," Gambit tells them all eagerly, the night they return from the Order. Gambit's real name is Suzanne Neilsen, and she's a muggleborn with a sharp mind and a strong tongue. In Remus' head, she's still Gambit. "She's been working with some German for-hire warders, building a little protected area on the north coast, near Rostock. Completely unplotable. We're going to keep muggleborn kids and the like out there. It'll be a long job, but Angel's up to the task."

"I don't know the name," Lily says curiously.

"Oh, she's before your time. Graduated a few years ago." Gambit smiles indulgently. "Hasn't gotten a job yet, the lazy bugger, but I suppose it was for the best, in the end, considering."

For how casually unbothered the Friends are in everything they do, James is *utterly* enamoured with them.

He thinks they're wonderful, the full and entire embodiment of everything the rebellion should be. He tells Remus as much, too, who agrees mostly to appease him. In Remus' opinion, they don't really seem like they know what they're doing. Maybe that's what James likes so much about them. Their entirely laissez-faire attitude to anti-government insurgence seems, apparently, to make them quite cool.

Aside from Gambit and Lyric (Suzzane and Chester, but their nicknames suit them far better), the Friends' main base has two other occupants: a half-Veela girl that Remus

doesn't know the name of who spends most of her time reading, and Jeremiah Holland, a muggleborn graduate with a knack for memory modification spellwork who has recently sacrificed dreams of becoming an Unspeakable in exchange for keeping his pulse.

Other runaways drift in and out, staying the night every so often but mostly just feeding them news before disappearing down into the muggle underground down the street from the apartment. A few of them greet their three new guests, and James gets quite a bit of praise for his stunt at the Ministry. For the most part, however, from the day they arrived until now, they've been left to sit on their thumbs while other arrangements are made.

"We're finding a safe location for an apartment right now," Lyric promises them for the fourth time, the morning after the meeting with the Order. "We just need to make sure it's not in a neighbourhood they've got their eyes on. We're thinking somewhere in the west side of the city, though the *rent* , cor blimey, you'll owe us for years..."

He's joking, of course. It's his inheritance they'll be spending, and somehow, it seems pretty doubtful he'll come along playing loan shark in a few years. Thank god for Hufflepuffs, Remus supposes.

The mailing system was Lily's idea, on their first night at the Friends' place. It's sort of genius, when you think about it; for all the death eaters are watching the skies like hawks, intercepting every owl they can pluck from the sky, there's no way they would lower themselves to digging through muggle mailing bins, especially not considering just how much bloody mail muggles send every month. James was skeptical for the first five minutes, and then he sat back in his seat and exclaimed it was the smartest idea he'd ever

heard, and Lily was a genius, which made her beam with pride.

Now, with their living situation in the lurch, the Order on hold and the moon still not for another few weeks, it's about the only thing they can work on.

"We need a way to make sure they all end up at the same place," James says. "But not a house. That could be tracked. Somewhere we can store messages."

"A P.O. box?" Lily suggests. "It's a muggle thing." And she launches into an explanation to James, who leans in interestedly, morning sunlight filtering through the dark strands of his hair.

It's barely seven AM and by the autumn light through their window, the three of them are already working for the day. The Order meeting wasn't even two days ago yet, and already, James and Lily's huge list of things to tell McGonagall about their mailing service has doubled in size.

The plan is this, Remus writes in one of his letters to Sirius, one night. James has probably already explained it you in detail, but I don't know which order you'll read these in, (that's a lie; Sirius will read James' first), so here it is from me: they want to set up a muggle postbox in Hogwarts, somewhere it won't be found, like behind one of the portraits in the Gryffindor common room. And they want to do something like a vanishing cabinet, but into another magical area (like the Order headquarters, or somewhere in Diagon Alley) so it doesn't set off the Trace, and then use the muggle postage service to get the letters out. It would let students contact their families privately, and their families write back, so long as the letters had an address to go back to, and we could funnel them back through the

vanishing cabinet postage box. And people could get in contact with us, too. We could set up a proper communications network. Mad, I know. Lily thinks she could do the spellwork, if only it wasn't for the Trace. Maybe we can get one of the Order to do it? Some of them have to be non-Traced, right?

(Personally, Remus is doubtful of the whole thing. However, he has been doubtful of every plan James Potter has put in front of him for the past six years, and each and every one of them has succeeded, so he doesn't argue. James is just magical like that.)

By the time the day of their meeting with the Order rolls around, they've got a solid plan: James has scouted out a local PO box company, and verified its location with the Friends to not be under surveillance by the death eaters and such; Lily has done enough research into the magic behind vanishing cabinets that her head must be exploding with it, aided by books and articles from the half-Veela girl, who is twice as bookish with half the charm; and Remus has brought them both cups of tea and rubbed out the knots in the back of James' neck, built up through hours of bad posture, as well as writing up a full list of every non-pureblood in the upper years, and theorising on which would have returned, and who to look for.

It's long, hard work. Luckily, the three of them work together fantastically.

"I can't wait to hear from Dorcas," Lily frets, as the three of them clamber out of the underground, trekking through North London to the Order's safehouse. "The idea of her being there, all alone... oh, but she's so stubborn. She wouldn't've left, not unless they dragged her out..."

"I'm sure McGonagall can tell us if she's alright," James says, in what might be intended to be a soothing tone. It comes out sounding rather anxious instead. He keeps shooting looks at Remus.

They peel around a corner into a dark alleyway. Lily cuts in front, because as much as James is their non-elected chief, in muggle environments, she takes the lead. Remus is perfectly content to follow them both anywhere they drag him. Content enough to not complain much, anyway.

James tugs on Remus' arm in the back as they sidestep an old McDonalds bag, drifting towards them across the concrete. "You're sure you're gonna be okay in there?"

"You know I'm not made of glass, don't you?" Remus asks, rather rhetorical. "I've faced plenty of rudeness about my condition before, Prongs. Plus, I'm sure they'll mention it less this time around. Not like it matters, right?"

But James chews on his lip. "You heard Jeremiah talking about it the other night, though, didn't you? The two werewolves the Ministry put down the other day. That and the whole thing with Nathaniel Travers... I don't know. It's a hot topic, is all I'm saying. And it might come up. And if they're rude about it, really rude, and you want to leave--"

"I won't leave because they make a few stupid comments," Remus defends. "I don't have a temper, I'm not Sirius."

"I know that!" James shakes his head. "I was saying I would come with you, if you left. That's all. Sod them, if they're going to be rude to you. We don't need them. Same as if they were weird about Lily's being a muggleborn, or... or anything. So if you want us to go at any point, we'll go. Just say the word. You matter more than them."

Despite himself, some small, victorious part of Remus burns hot and gleeful at that. James is ridiculous. Unbidden, he remembers something Sirius told him, the last time they talked. *You think I don't lie awake and wonder every night? Wonder what I did to deserve him? It haunts me, Moony.*

"Okay," Remus says, mostly to appease, but he forces some part of him to mean it. He can't, in good conscience, lie to James about anything.

Lily pretends not to hear their exchange as she leads them to the street the Order's HQ is settled on. It's grimey and squat, houses all lined up like rotten teeth. It reminds Remus of Grimmauld. The Order's is number two-hundred and three, right at the end of the long promenade. It's faded and unremarkable. James takes the lead at that point, knocking thrice on the mahogany. Lily and Remus crowd in around his shoulders. Up the street, something -- perhaps one of the tall trees curling over the tops of the houses, dark boughs moaning -- shifts in the wind.

Remus glances over his shoulder. For a split second, his hackles raise. He gets the distinct feeling he's being watched.

The door opens. A face peers out at them -- Caradoc Dearborn. Ex-auror trainee. He's got a brash, brown face, spotted with moles.

He grins. "Alright, lads? And lass, I suppose. Come in, quickly, the meeting starts soon."

James and Lily hurry inside. For a moment, Remus lingers on the doorstep, peering down the street. The wolf howls indignantly in his chest. It doesn't like this, not one bit.

Then, James tugs on his arm, and Remus shakes himself, turning to face his friends' worried faces.

"You okay?" Lily asks.

He nods. "Fine. Come on."

Like last time, they box him in on either side like a small, rather ineffectual set of bouncers. James squeezes his hand, then lets go like a hot coal as they follow Dearborn down the hallway towards the meeting room.

Two-hundred and three, Hackney Terrace, has the distinct, bitter smell of a house that has been the long-term home of indoor chainsmokers. Even magic probably couldn't lift the thick scent of it out of the walls. It smells like magic, too -- like burnt toast, like London, like Sirius. A flickering bulb hangs low over the entry hallway, the kitchen door out ahead of them. The walls are plastered in gaudy, dark wallpaper that makes the whole place feel oppressive and heavy. From the few times he's seen 12 Grimmauld Place through James' mirror, Remus thinks privately that this place reminds him of Sirius' family home.

Dearborn ushers them all into the kitchen. Remus enters last, bumping into James' back as his friend comes to a sudden halt, staring out over a room full of eyes which stare right back.

At the head of the table, McGonagall nods to each of them, silhouetted by a bright white fire crackling in the grate behind her. Alastor Moody sits beside her, scowling at them, and next to him are a pair of other older aurors that Remus can't name. Beyond them is another old trainee auror -- Emmeline Vance, who graduated in Remus' second year -- and Dedalus Diggle, whose face Remus has seen in the papers a few times, and little Professor Flitwick, and the

herbology professor, and dozens of wizards Remus doesn't know, young and old, all with war-weary faces and curious eyes. There has to be at least thirty people crammed into the small room, and the space is made to feel even smaller by the hulking figure in the corner, who gives a great roar as their trio shuffles in.

"Hagrid!" James exchanges gleefully, all mistrust forgotten. He clambers around a few chairs to the half-giant's side, who picks James up under the armpits and gives him a great squeeze.

"Oh, you ruddy troublemaker, you-- no idea how worried we've been, no idea 'tal," Hagrid is saying. "And you, Lupin, Evans! Get o'er here!"

Reluctantly, faces burning, Remus and Lily clamber to Hagrid's corner for their own tight hugs. Lily looks very pleased, though, as Hagrid musses up her short hair with one huge hand.

"Glad to see you in one piece, Lupin," he tells Remus after he's put him down, hand heavy on his smaller shoulders. "Honest. I was worried, with the... well. Glad you're here."

McGonagall coughs into her hand. "As touching as such things are, Rubeus, I do believe we have a meeting to be getting on with..."

"Ah, right... yeah. Right. Sorry." Hagrid lowers himself gingerly back into his chair, which squeals against the tiled floor under his weight. "My 'pologies, everyone."

Three seats have been kept for James, Remus and Lily, towards the middle of the table. Right in the centre of the hurricane. James takes the seat closest to McGonagall, and they make sure Remus takes the one in the middle. He's too

overwhelmed to put up a fight, so that's that. Lily takes the seat beside him, knee touching his under the table.

Surrounded by adults like this, Remus feels abruptly, absurdly, like he's about five years old. It is not a pleasant sensation.

"Alright," McGonagall says, after a moment of taut silence. "This week doesn't bring much good news, so I suppose we should get into it: as I'm sure most of you know, as of two days ago, Arthur Weasley is missing."

James' face twists. Remus grabs his hand under the table and squeezes hard.

"Aye," Moody says, from McGonagall's side. He looks very sullen as he sits there, sprawled in his seat with his magical eye spinning wildly, like he could (and would) jump up at any moment and hex the lot of them. "Vanished on his way home from his job at the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts office, from what we've heard. Probably because he was recognised to have been present at the Rosier Wedding."

"I bloody warned him," one of the younger aurors mutters, folding his arms across his chest. "I told him he should have gone into hiding..."

"Well," Moody snaps, "maybe you should have tried convincing him better, Fenwick. Commiserating won't do anything for anybody."

"We've already got some suspicions as to where he's being kept," McGonagall cuts in. "Azkaban isn't likely, since even with the shambles the Ministry is in, imprisonment without trial is still largely taboo, even in pureblood circles. We suspect one of the ancestral homes of a prominent death eater. Malfoy, perhaps--"

"The Rosiers have a cellar where they keep prisoners," James cuts in. Everybody turns to look at him and he wilts like he's rotting. "Uh. I mean. It's large, as wide as the whole manor, and fully underground. Can't be accessed unless you go upstairs first, so you have to get through the wards and through the house, and the stairs attack you on your way back down. And, uh, it's got a few cells. So at least a few people are probably down there."

"I see," McGonagall says simply. "You'll stay behind to recount this fully?"

James nods. "Sure," he says, shoulders curling up to his ears with the attention on him. Two years ago, fourteen year-old James Potter would have glowed with it. Now, he looks rather like he'd enjoy burying himself in a deep hole.

"Alright," McGonagall says. "Aside from Arthur, Gideon Prewett is still missing, and there have been no leads on his location. We suspect they're both being kept in the same place as Shacklebolt--"

"Shacklebolt's missing?" James asks.

"Has been since the wedding," Emmeline Vance tells him gently.

"Oh."

McGonagall shoots him a look and presses on. "Wherever the three of them are being kept, it's likely they're being held separately from each other, and away from any general population of prisoners there may be. Wandless, of course, and somewhere with strong warding, since I know that at the very least, Shacklebolt should be able to cast a wandless patronus."

"We've got eyes on a new location," an Order member speaks up from across the table. Old and wizened, he's got a silver beard and a sharp, wild sort of face. "Sauvageon House. Oxfordshire. It was a gift from the Sauvageons -- purebloods, Belgian -- to the Lestranges a few generations ago. Currently not lived in, and since it isn't technically in the Lestranges' estate, it doesn't show up on their public records, so it's unplottable." His eyes gleam. "For the moment."

"Keep working on it," McGonagall instructs. "Sounds promising. Palomer, is there any news from the Ministry?"

"Not much new since last week," Palomer, a tired-looking thirty year-old witch with long, white-blond hair, says. "Minchum's keeping his affairs close to his chest. Well." She laughs grimly. "Whoever's controlling Minchum is doing so, and quite well, from what I can tell. Almost all of the higher-ups in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement are death eaters, sympathisers or imperiused now, so I suppose that answers the question, Professor. Any news there is is bad news."

"I see." McGonagall purses her lips. "And of the courtrooms?"

"The most high-profile case we've currently got is Travers v. Deschamps," Palomer says. "Some old housing affair, a dispute over blood land. Pureblood nonsense. It's mostly being so publicised to cover up the overhauls in the Wizengamot."

"Yeah," Fabian Prewett, looking extraordinarily tired, says from nearby. Remus hadn't noticed him before. He looks smaller than usual without his twin beside him. "Did you see they even wrote an article about that case in Witch Weekly?"

It's as if they don't think real people with brains read the papers."

"That's because real people with brains don't read the papers," James mutters.

A few people laugh. Fabian shoots James a reserved smile. Say what you want about James, Remus thinks affectionately, but one cannot say he doesn't bring a smile to every single room.

Around the table the conversation leaps, as various wizards and witches of all shapes and ages catch the Order up on news of their side of the wizarding world. One American wizard in a baseball cap and heavy dark trousers speaks of violence across the pond, mafioso types in Nevada and California collaborating with dark wizards for quick cash. An Irish witch with a narrow, brave-looking face warns that a group of rogue snatchers have been selling magical artefacts to soldiers in Northern Ireland, which strikes up a spirited (albeit brief) debate about muggle politics. Lily has strong opinions on Margaret Thatcher, apparently. Remus might have guessed that on his own.

For the most part, however, the bad news is centred in England. Remus feels a little guilty for his relief at that. Wales will survive this. Wales will survive this. It has to.

"A pack's been spotted, too," the wizard speaking finishes with, and Remus does everything he can not to flinch and doesn't quite succeed. "On the south coast of Guernsey, so not too far from here. Gathering forces, I suspect."

Lily and James have both stiffened up, too. None of them say a word, though Remus can feel eyes darting to him throughout the room. Most of them -- if not all -- know. They can see him, and they know.

"I see," McGonagall says, scribbling something down on the parchment laid out in front of her. "Have any werewolves of note been spotted?"

"Apart from the one in this room, that is," Moody mutters.

McGonagall acts as if he hadn't spoken.

"No," the first wizard replies. "But we know they're on the move. Blackwood reckons that's what happened to Verda Pertinger, since the largest known pack are on the move down through Scotland as we speak."

"She suspects they... they bit her?" McGonagall asks, mildly alarmed.

"It's not the full moon," Remus interjects. "She vanished after the last one, not before."

The wizard glances sidelong at Remus. "Still," he says stallingly. "They might have... well..."

James bristles. "Werewolves aren't bloodthirsty monsters around the clock, you know," he says staunchly.

"Yeah," Lily puts in. "They wouldn't have attacked her if it wasn't the full moon--"

"What a great bloody contribution," a wizard Remus doesn't know mutters across the room. "Glad to know we've got three kids so willing to defend *death eaters*."

"We never said they weren't death eaters!" Lily protests. "Just that they're not... well." She shoots Remus a nervous look. "They can't have transformed and attacked her, the timeline isn't right."

McGonagall raises a hand before an argument can start. "We'll add it to our list of theories," she says. "Thank you, Belmont."

"You're welcome," the wizard, Belmont, says stiffly. He settles back into his chair, glowering.

"Now," McGonagall takes over. "Unless anybody else has anything to contribute, I think it would be best if we all adjourn... yes, Prewett?"

Fabian Prewett is staring at the three of them. "We want to know about Sirius Black," he says.

A murmur ripples through the room. Remus sees a few people nod.

"We've already told Professor McGonagall everything we know," Lily starts.

James shakes his head at her. He turns back to look at Fabian. "He's on the run," he says. "He's learned something about you-know-who and it's... something bad. Something that could kill him. You-know-who, that is. So you-know-who wants him dead."

Fabian snorts. "Most of us had figured that out already. We want to know what it is he found out."

"Well," James says. He chews on his lip. He actually looks his age for once, then. A scared, pathetic teen. "Well, we don't... we don't know. Not yet."

A smattering of laughs, though most of them don't sound very amused. Fabian raises an eyebrow. "You don't?"

"He does," James hurries. "But he told me he couldn't tell anybody. So we're trying to find him and..."

"And help him kill Voldemort," Lily says. Nobody winces at the name. "That's our plan."

"Kill Voldemort?" somebody snaps. "He's a teenager."

"Without what he knows, Voldemort can't be taken down," James contests. "It's vital we find him."

"And if he's so ruddy important to the war effort," an auror James thinks he recognises puts in, "why does it seem like he doesn't want to be found? Surely he'd have come back by now, if he was going to play revolutionary. But it's like he's disappeared off the face of the earth."

"We'll find him," James says fiercely. "We will. He's... he's scared right now. Scared of getting other people killed, too, if others find out. But if anybody can find him, it's us."

McGonagall clears her throat. "As we have been doing for over a year now," she says, "We will continue searching for Black. As doubtful as some of us might be, I'm sure. At the very least, he is... well. A child. And even if he cannot truly help us, he deserves to go home."

James rolls his eyes and says nothing. All three of them have known for a while now that they're never, ever going to let Sirius go back home.

"And despite their youth," McGonagall says, a note of pride in her voice now, "Padfoot's Army have a little more to provide than their connection to Black, don't you, Potter?"

"We want to set up a communications system," James says, nodding. He steps back into his element like he never left it.

"A mailing service. Between Hogwarts and the muggle world. So we can get letters back and forth between students and their families, and so we can communicate with spies on the inside, too, so we can still know what's going on in there even if we don't have contact with any of the teachers. And if we can, we want to expand it outside of just Hogwarts. We want to use the muggle mailing system to connect different insurgent groups, and..." He seems to lose his trail of thought for a moment. "And, well. Something like that. We've got all the plans written up for it already, we just need somebody without the trace on them to do the spellwork--"

Faint laughter fans through the room again. McGonagall smiles serenely. "You'll find, Potter," she says, "That being in the Order of the Phoenix has some... perks."

James shoots the others a confused look. It seems to hit Lily first and she gasps, pulling her wand from inside her jacket and flourishing it. Three golden orbs of light fly from the tip and explode against the ceiling, raining sparks.

No death eaters appear. The air stays mercifully quiet, and the only magic Remus can smell is Lily's soft, golden light.

Grinning, he pulls out his own wand, though at the last minute, he hands it to a morose-looking James. "You go first," he urges. "Since you don't have yours anymore."

James shoots Remus a brilliant smile. Black bubbles explode from the tip of the wand like fireworks, the colour of mercy. Even his magic is, after all this time, Sirius.

Sirius,

Our new apartment is BRILLIANT. It's only two bedrooms, and one of them is going to be storage for the mailing service stuff and other things, and we're keeping a spare camp bed in there, too, in case people end up staying with us. James and Lily and I are sharing the largest bedroom (it's got a bunk bed: Lily took the top, we're on the bottom), and there's a kitchen and a living room, too. It's in a nice area, nicer than Grimmauld, and even though we can't get anybody to enchant it so we can use magic in it (which James is very upset about), it's OURS. Lily's already gone out with James to do a food shop, and I've been tasked with cleaning all the cupboards. I haven't felt this at-home since... well.

I can't wait for you to be here. I don't know if you'll want the camp bed or the sofa or, or maybe the three of us can squeeze into one of the levels of the bunk bed, though it'd be bloody uncomfortable. James kicks. I imagine you everywhere. Sitting in the huge window in the kitchen, or at the table, or in the living room, over our huge pile of notes and books. There's a metro station only down the street, and it always smells like you (like London, I suppose) and. You would love it.

It feels like we're really doing this, Sirius. Like we're seriously a real group, now, with a headquarters and everything. We're keeping the name. It's only fitting. I don't think any of us would have gone so far as we have if it wasn't for your shadow hanging over us all.

As for our immediate plans: today, we're going to get this place decked out. Lily knows some protection runes that won't set off the trace, and James is putting sneakoscopes everywhere, stolen from the Order's HQ, and I'm going to go buy blackout curtains. Once we're stocked up on food and essentials (James lost his toothbrush AGAIN), we want

to get to work with the mailing service (the PO box company we want to use isn't far from here, twenty minutes on foot, so James is going to go rent one out tomorrow morning). Lily's going to enchant the mailbox herself at Order HQ, and McGonagall has agreed to sneak it in. They're going to put it in one of the shower stalls of the first year Gryffindor boys' dorm, since there aren't any kids staying there this year. It should transfer any and all letters right to the PO box, and we can take them out from there and deliver them through the muggle post, or by hand, if we need to. Our very own delivery service!

We're theorising on Regulus, too, and how to get him out of Durmstrang. Do you think they'll send him home for Christmas? We might try to heist him out of Grimmauld Place. If he even wants to escape that is. Honestly, I don't know much about him. None of us do. You didn't talk about him very much.

But: that's a job for later. For now, it's the mailing service (which James and Lily were trying to come up with a name for when they left earlier: James thinks it should be the Moony Mailing Service, keeping with the theme of Maraudery naming conventions, and Lily thinks it should be something innocuous, like The Underbelly, which sounds too spy-ish to me), reuniting Padfoot's Army, Order meetings, helping with Direct Action, and finding you.

What a life we all live, huh? Stay safe out there. If not for me, then for James.

Remus.

It's the Friday before the next full moon, September drowning into October, when McGonagall finally installs the

vanishing postbox in Gryffindor Tower. Their PO box has only one lock, which James keeps on a chain around his neck, tucked into his shirt most of the time and hanging out when he forgets. He goes to check every morning and every evening, and each time, he comes back empty-handed.

For those first few days, they receive no new mail, which devastates James and confuses Lily, who worries openly to Remus that she's done the spellwork wrong.

"You?" Remus asks her. "No, no way. You've got it just fine. Just give it time, Lily. You were top of our charms class for years."

"I wasn't." Lily sniffs. "That was Sirius."

"Right. Well. He cheated from me for essays ever since second year, so he would have failed on the non-practical stuff anyway."

"Oh. Thanks, I suppose." She smiles a watery smile down at him from the top bunk.

It's evening, Sunday night now, and James is out checking the box again, mostly to find something to do with himself. Their apartment is faintly lit by the glow of the flickering lampshade above. Remus' list of non-purebloods is sitting on his chest, scrawled through the margins with notes and annotations. Above, Remus knows Lily is scanning through her notebook for where she could have mucked up the charms on the vanishing postbox, too. When this war ends, Remus has no idea what either of them will do with themselves. James will run off and become captain of some great quidditch team, and they'll rot away in some hideout somewhere, never quite sure where to belong.

"I wonder sometimes," Lily says, "whether we should have kept up studies. For our NEWTs, I mean."

"Oh, yeah?" The idea of James studying anything voluntarily is laughable.

"Yes." Lily hesitates. "Since I doubt we'll be going back to school anytime soon. We'll probably be too old to return, by the time all of this ends. The idea that we'll never start another Hogwarts term again, never put on the uniform again... never sit in the common room again..." She trails off.

Remus hadn't even considered that before. A tight, sickly feeling blossoms in his gut. Never romping around on full moons in the Shrieking Shack again, never running through the forbidden forest with the others again, never sitting in the owlery with Sirius again, never watching James run the length of the quidditch pitch ten times before practice to warm up in the early morning again...

Across the apartment, the front door bangs open. Glad for the distraction, Lily and Remus exchange looks. Remus stands from his bunk and Lily slips down from her own.

"Guys?!" James shouts. "Guys, we uh, we got some mail!"

Remus hurries out into the hallway and there, in the door, is James, arms piled high with dozens and dozens of letters, some of which are lying on the floor around him.

"Forgot to bring a bag," he grunts. "Help?"

With a breathy, gleeful laugh, Lily darts forwards to lessen his load. Together, the three of them pour all the letters onto the kitchen table. There have to be at least fifty, some

of them tiny and thin, others huge and packed thick. They spill off the sides and onto the floor.

When he's locked the front door and put all the letters down, James collapses into a chair at the table. "Oh Merlin," he says, faintly wondrous.

"You can say that again." Remus sits down beside him, staring at their huge bounty.

Lily stares. Remus can practically hear the cogs turning in her brilliant mind. "Oh," she says. "Oh. I know what I did wrong."

"You did something wrong?"

She nods. "Yeah. It's-- I must have enchanted it to empty every three days, not every three hours. Merlin. Sorry, James."

But James is grinning like a maniac. "No, it's fantastic. Amazing. Brilliant, Lily, truly. You're a genius."

"She is," Remus agrees. "How do we... how do we even start?"

Lily chews her lip, then says, "One sec. Stay here, both of you."

She rushes off. James and Remus exchange incredulous looks. Remus wants to kiss him. They'll have plenty of time for that later, though.

"I can't believe it," James tells him. "People... people trust us. People trust us enough to do this."

Remus shrugs, trying to keep his voice casual. "They must've liked your mesh shirt, Prongs."

"Oh, shove off." But James' bright, beautiful smile doesn't fade.

Lily bursts back in. She's got her arms full of bags -- James' backpack, Remus' drawstring sack, her own duffel bag, and two others, both belonging to her and Remus. She dumps them out on the kitchen floor.

"Okay," she says. "Let's get to sorting, then?"

They work late into the night, Remus getting up to make tea and coffee every hour or so. James sits on one of the chairs, Lily sitting back against his legs on the floor, and Remus perches on the table itself, cross-legged. They work in relative silence, but for the occasional interjection.

About half of the letters are from students to their families. Some of them are marked with full addresses, and others simply with names or family homes (one, from a cousin of Arthur Weasley, is marked simply 'Arthur'). The children of muggles seem to know how the post works, for the most part. Kids from wizarding families are a whole other story. This is the largest pile, growing inside Lily's duffel bag, though it's split into sendable, properly addressed letters and ones that'll have to be sent by hand ('Mum's house' would hardly make it in the muggle postal service).

Another large section is made up of letters to specific people. One, in scrawling hand, is to some woman called Umbridge, the new Secretary of Education, and it goes solidly in the 'to read ourselves before sending off' pile (which James seems uncomfortable with, but both Lily and

Remus agree is entirely necessary). Another is to the Minister for Magic. Three are addressed to Albus Dumbledore, and two more to Professor McGonagall, and six to Nathaniel Travers, which makes Remus' heart leap. Complaints.

A huge wealth of the letters, however, are simply addressed 'Padfoot's Army' or, less commonly, 'James Potter'. Two of them are thick like they've got more than just letters in them, and James holds each up to the sneakoscope, though it doesn't start spinning.

There are three addressed to the Friends of London, and five to the Order of the Phoenix. At least twenty are for the three of them, though.

"We'll read them last," James says. "We should get through the muggle ones first, we can get them to a nearby post office by morning."

"We'll need stamps," Remus suggests.

"Damn, you're right," Lily says. She stands up. "I'll go down to Tesco, down the road. They should still be open."

She shuffles into Remus' jacket and James' boots. With her hair that short, she could pass for a teenage boy. Or a punk. Cool, either way.

"Stay safe!" James calls after her.

"I always do!" she shouts back.

Then, it's just James and Remus and the letters. Remus is sorting through another, smaller pile (these are letters that are supposed to go out of the country, most of them from students with families in France and Spain, though there

are two that are addressed to North America, of all places, do they think they're made of money?), and James is sifting through a handful of letters with indecipherable addresses, the handwriting too messy to read.

"Let me see those," Remus says, a few minutes after Lily has taken her leave. "I've been reading your chicken scratch for years. Give 'em here."

James hands over the letters, shuffling to Remus' side to peer over his shoulder at them. "I reckon that one starts with 'Miss', though they do their 's's all weird. And this one, here-- that says 'Alexander' right? Or Alexandra? Alejandro?"

"Alexandra, I think," Remus murmurs, holding the letter up close to their faces. James' chest presses tight against his back. "Look, there's only one loop after the 'r'."

"Right."

Remus twists his head to look at James. Their faces are very close. James' nose is wrinkled up with concentration in that way it gets sometimes, but when he turns to look at Remus, his face loosens into a bright smile.

"Happy?" James asks.

"Very," Remus confirms. "Happy?"

"Very."

"Good." Remus glances out of the window, under the blackout curtains and into the impenetrable night. Rain has started to fall. Lily's going to be drenched by the time she gets back. "I was worried for a while it wouldn't work."

“Me, too,” James admits. He hooks his chin over Remus’ shoulder. “We could seriously do this, you know.”

“We are seriously doing this.”

“But for real. Y’know. Expand through the country. Set up a proper system. Lily’s smart enough, and so are you.” He grins. “And I can do the muscle work.”

“Professor McGonagall doesn’t want you fighting until you’re seventeen,” Remus reminds him.

“Since when is McGonagall the boss of me?”

“She might not be, but I am.”

James sticks out his tongue. “You got me there. You really are.”

Remus watches his wet, brown lips for a while. When he looks back up, James is staring at him.

“It’s the moon soon,” Remus murmurs. Their faces are even closer now.

James nods. His hair tickles Remus’ forehead. “Wednesday, isn’t it?”

Remus nods. “After the full,” he says tremulously, “we should... we should go back to Grimmauld Place. Even just to scout it out. Bet we could try to find a way through the roof.”

James hesitates. “I’ve been thinking, actually. Sirius has my mirror.”

“He does?”

James nods. "I gave it to him at the wedding. He might still have it now. And... well. There's about a ninety per cent chance his family destroyed his when he was taken, but..."

"But you think it might still be there?" Remus asks.

Hot breath on his face, James nods. "His family are going to be at the Lestrangle Manor next week," he whispers. "The Blacks are having a family reunion. Read it in *Le Nouveau Monde*. A few days after the moon."

"You're really good at pillow talk," Remus whispers back.

James laughs against his lips. "You'll come with me?"

"I'd go with you anywhere," Remus breathes. James kisses him and it tastes like freedom. Like pure magic. Like Sirius.

They end up on the floor. In a pile of scattered letters, James shuffles a hand around Remus' neck and kisses him like a drowning man. Remus grips onto his hair, half atop him. They send one of the piles toppling over and neither of them cares much.

The front door opens. Without a word, Lily steps over them both and gets back to her work, sighing loudly and tripping rainwater.

"Boys," she says. "This is why I never had the time for them."

Chapter End Notes

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DOMESTIC

Chapter Notes

happy 100k to this fic, it has been fuckin. three weeks.
not the fastest ive ever written a passion project but
wow, that's nuts

enjoy! this one was fun. we're REALLY getting into the
plotty stuff now. :D

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Padfoot's Army,

Hello lads! We heard about the graffiti in the Ministry -- amazing! It brought the morale up for days. It's good to hear you're all still out there and kicking, and Potter, we heard you on that 'Direct Action' broadcast the other day too! We've got a radio in the Gryffindor common room and we listen every week, those of us who came back. There's only about thirty of us. It really keeps our spirits up.

The Prophet's all garbage, and the teachers won't tell us anything. What's going on out there, really? Is Hagrid okay? They came to try to drag him away weeks ago and nobody's seen him since.

Pettigrew says to give you all his best. Send news soon! People have written individual letters too, you should get those with this one!

- Gryffindor Boys.

The letter to the Secretary of Education has five dungbombs in it. After some deliberation, James, Remus and Lily decide they should deliver it anyway, and they put it with the pile of letters to be hand-delivered.

That's what leads James to where he is now -- hovering near the entrance to the Ministry building in a slouch hat and one of Remus' farmerish canvas jackets, waiting. It was a tip from one of the Order that brought him here, a man named Mundungus who watches the Ministry entrance a lot, apparently, because he knows Delores Umbridge's commute like the back of his hand. Maybe just to pickpocket, James thinks, and crouches further into the shadows.

I don't even know much about her, he wrote in his letter last night. This Umbridge woman. But she seems like a cow, and she's been behind tons of anti-werewolf legislation, really nasty stuff. Definitely you-know-who's sort. Reading about it upset Remus a bit, so that was that, I suppose. Even though Lily thinks it's stupid of me to do this, she agreed we should do it anyway, and even if she hadn't it's not like she can do anything, right?

They've only been at this delivery service business for four days, and it is *immensely* time-consuming.

Unwilling to take much more of Lyric's money, and aware of how dangerous it is to make too many trips back and forth from the Order getting them to duplicate muggle banknotes, Lily has decided that one of them should probably get a job, so as to afford stamps and shipping, and other necessities such as food and running water. Remus volunteered immediately, and has an interview as a till worker at a Sainsbury's tomorrow morning. He's already

fretting about having to miss work for moons. James has promised him they're going to figure something out.

With the last of their current disposable income, Lily's out this morning too, buying up stamps, envelopes and boxes for the flat from the local post office. Remus is sleeping in. James has left a plate of eggs for him on the bottom shelf of the oven to keep it warm. It's a brisk, bright, cold day, perfectly autumnal, the orange sun shining in streaks over the frosty earth.

And Umbridge is coming up the street towards him.

James swears under his breath, ducking backwards into the shadows and watching as she plods towards him, up the intersecting street. She's a short, stout woman with tightly curled brown hair, in pink robes. Her dark, sharp-toed shoes tap the ground as she walks, almost metallic. Even muggles, to whom she must look quite odd, seem to know to stay out of her way.

When she's past James, carrying on further up the street, James steps out and begins to tail her, following her as silently and inconspicuously as he can, hands buried in his pockets. One of them clutches the letter very tightly. A few muggles shoot him odd looks and he nods to them, trying to smile. The cold feels like it's frozen his cheeks solid.

Ahead, Umbridge slows briefly to adjust a button at her throat. He closes in. She speeds up again, and as she turns a corner, James darts forwards and tosses a handful of coins onto the ground behind her.

"Uh, ma'am!" he shouts after her. "'scuse me? You dropped these, miss."

Umbridge spins on her heel. She's got a purebloodish sort of curl to her lip. She raises an imperious eye at him.

"Excuse me?"

James gestures at the ground, keeping his head tilted low so she can't make out his features, to where the letter and a pile of sickles are sitting in the gutter. "Y'dropped these, miss. Fell out your... coat."

"I see." As if afraid to get too close to him for fear of getting dirty, Umbridge steps forwards. "If you would excuse me."

"Uh, right, 'f course," James mutters. He steps back, and Umbridge bends in as dignified a manner as he imagines she can muster, slotting the letter and coins back into her robes. "Sorry."

She turns on her heel, not saying a word to him of thanks or anything else. James supposes it's for the best. Even if it confirms what he'd suspected of what she thinks about muggles, she isn't going to interrogate him or anything. She probably didn't get a good look at his face, either, so that's something.

One hand-delivery done. About twenty more to go, he supposes, and starts off towards the metro station across the street, keeping an eye on Umbridge's short, pink form as it disappears up the street, through the rippling, dappled shade. What a horrible woman.

Back at the apartment, Remus is still asleep. When James peeks in on him he's dead to the world, arms wrapped tightly around their spare pillow, face upturned towards the crisp sunlight. Lily has yet to return and James has a rare moment of peace to make a coffee in one of their chipped charity store mugs, and sit in the kitchen window, and stare out over the awakening city.

Yes, he thinks, spying their newest pile of letters out of the corner of his eye, which Lily has piled on the table again. Today is going to be a good day.

James,

Is it really you and Remus setting this up? If so, it's great. Don't really know what to say. It's lonely here without you guys. I'm doing okay, though school is horrible without all of you, and the new teachers are all awful. The Slytherins seem to love it. McGonagall can't even do anything about any of the stuff they do. It's like she's not even the headmistress at all.

Hoping for all of this to be over soon. There's tons of rumours about you lot. Is Sirius okay? Is he with you?

Write back to me if you can!

Peter.

At the next order meeting, James gives Fabian Prewett the letter for Arthur Weasley. "Came through the mailing service," he says. "We had to open it to see which Arthur it was for. It's from one of his cousins."

Fabian stares from the letter back up at James. "Why me?" he asks.

"Isn't your sister about five kids deep with Arthur Weasley now? Give it to her." James shrugs.

"Not five." Fabian grins weakly. "I am starting to lose count already, though. It'll be more when we get him back, just you wait."

This meeting -- the third they've gone to -- is much the same as the other two. Mostly bad news with a smattering of pleasant. Pertinger, the missing robe seamstress, has shown up again, apparently injured while trying to save a group of muggles from a sporting attack by death eaters. She was cursed by one and saved by some Icelandic insurgent after putting out a distress call. Not werewolves, James thinks, quite vindicated. Not werewolves.

Moody has other concerns. "And what sort of distress call might this have been, Minerva, that some bloody stranger in Iceland got it and we didn't?"

McGonagall sets her jaw. "We have some theories," she says, though she doesn't sound particularly sure of herself. "From what we know, we suspect there to be some broader network of insurgents working outside of the British Isles. We're going to attempt to make contact, if we can. Pertinger may have known about them due to her upbringing in Canada."

James, Remus and Lily exchange looks interestedly. James has very little knowledge of wizarding politics outside of Britain -- he's always supposed he'll never need to know, but seeing the state of things now, maybe it'd help to get some allies overseas. He stores it away in his mind to think about more later.

Hagrid's gone this week, off to make contact with a fleet of giants in the Alps. None of the Order seem particularly worried about him, which is something, James supposes, though in his opinion, they should be. He's never seen a giant in person before, but he imagines they would be the sort of magical creature that expands out of the realms of imagination and can't really be pictured in your head unless you've seen them. Terrifying in an expansive sort of way.

Then again, if they think Hagrid's capable, well. Maybe James should have more faith in him, too.

(When he steals a look at Remus, Remus is staring at the table, seemingly lost in thought. Huh.)

James Potter (+ Padfoot's Army),

They're saying we can get individual letters out to you lot, is that true? I suppose if this is intercepted there's not much more they can do to me now.

Is Lily with you? How is she? Tell her to write me back, if she's there. I've been right worried about her, especially since Marlene didn't come back this term either. It's just me in the dorm now, since Mary obviously didn't come back either. Hope you and Lupin are alright, too. Your antics have been keeping us all in high spirits. Pettigrew's been all morose without you here. Don't know why he thought to come back. They mostly leave him alone, though, so no need to worry about all that.

I've lots of time on my hands this term, unsurprisingly. They've cut me out of half of my classes and the only ones I've been allowed to stay in are duds. If you need anything done over on this side of the magical world, I'm your girl. Spying or something, I don't know. Just want to feel like I've got some sort of purpose for being here, you know? I promised myself I'd last this year out somehow, but it's getting harder.

I don't know if anybody's told you, but they're a lot worse with punishments this year. Most of the younger kids have had the Blood Quill used on them at some point, barring those with families that have some influence (i.e. mini death eaters), and the older years usually get it worse. I

had the cruciatus curse used on me for the first time three days ago. It's starting to feel really bloody pointless for me to be here at all.

But I want to do what I can. If you need me to try to get PA back together, or keep an eye on anybody, or... anything, I suppose. Me and some of the seventh years were even talking about pulling something similar to what you all did at the Ministry the other day, too. If nothing else, I think it would send a message; that we're still fighting; that we're not going to give up, no matter how they treat us. Mind you, it's hard to get around without being watched in here these days. Wish we all had one of your bloody cloaks. That would make all of this ten times easier, wouldn't it?

I've attached a letter for Marlene, if you see her, or if you know where she is. Don't read it, Potter -- I'll know.

Stay safe out there, all of you. I might be seeing you sooner than expected, I suppose, with the way things are going.

Regards,

Dorcas Meadows.

October's full moon brings a similarly unpleasant transformation as last month. The wolf is unhappy, tense and ready to snap at any moment, and while James doesn't need to fight it, it's certainly snippy enough to make it clear that it hates doing this without Padfoot.

James makes it to the end of the night with only a handful of bruises along his side, and a sharp slash along the top of his cheekbone, not deep enough to scar. By the time Remus stiffens with the end of the transformation, shoulders

tightening wolfishly as he goes still in the middle of the yellow-flowered field, James aches all over.

Like always, he catches him.

"Clothes," James grunts, arms full of halfway conscious werewolf. "Come on, you. We gotta get to the road."

"I'm starkers," Remus mutters into the side of his throat, hot breath in James' shirt. "Preserve my decency, Prongs."

"We're not putting your clothes on in the middle of an insect-infested field."

"Infested? Pretty sure the insects are meant to be--" And Remus, arm now slung around James' throat, trips over a rock as they begin to trek through the field. "Bloody- ow. Fuck."

"All that transformation business and all it takes to take you down is a stubbed toe," James laughs. "Come on. We're almost there. Nobody's out here, anyway. Too early."

It's true. The road is makeshift, cut through the middle of two fields by tractor tracks, and no farmers are out this early. James sits Remus down in the dry dirt and fishes for his clothes, pulling Remus into them like a bony, lanky ragdoll. He'll never cease being glad that when you're an animagus, your clothes transform with you. It would be a bloody nuisance to have to get changed every time you transformed.

Remus lets himself be manhandled, eyes droopy with exhaustion. He's uninjured but for the usual aches and pains, and a narrow slash across the inside of his arm which has already stopped bleeding.

"Splinter," he mutters to James, lying back in the dust, head among the yellow flowers that poke out from under the fence. "In my thumb."

"You big wimp." James dutifully locates the splinter and loosens it from under the skin, flicking it away. "There. Happy?"

"Very." Remus shuffles to make himself comfortable, long legs stretched out into the road. James lies beside him and they watch the purplish sky above lighten with the beginnings of sunrise. "The wolf is bloody horrible right now. Mean, I mean. Sorry."

"It's fine." James rolls his chin around to rest on Remus' arm. "We're all a bit mean right now."

"You're not. You're way less mean than you could be."

James shoves him. "Come off it. I was never that bad."

"Yes, you were."

"Well." James yawns. "You knew us best. Guess I have to take your word for it."

Remus is silent for a while. "I'm proud of you," he murmurs, when James thinks he's fallen asleep. "For everything this last year. I dunno if anybody's said that to you, but you deserve to hear it. Lily, too."

"Oh," James says, unable to think of much else to say to that. "Thanks, Moony."

"She really couldn't stand you." Remus watches the sky with intense interest. "For a long time. I know you and Sirius acted like she was joking but she wasn't. She hated you."

Hated you because things seemed so easy for you." He shrugs. "I think I did for a while, too."

"You did?"

"Yeah. Internally, not out loud. I guess after the shock wore off that you all wanted to be my friend, back in first year, I..." Remus shrugs. "South Wales isn't a rich place, James. Most of my friends from before had grown up with nothing, and I did, too. You see a lot of poverty growing up where I did. I was a broke werewolf with a broken family, descended from miners and labourers, and I looked at you and Sirius and... it felt unfair. That you both had so much and didn't seem to see it."

"Sirius didn't--"

"I know. I know things sucked for him, too." Remus shrugs. "I think he was just good enough at hiding it. And he was... confident, and good-looking, and seemed to believe every good thing people told him about himself, and it was alluring as much as it was frustrating."

"...I see."

"But you've really made an effort to change," Remus carries on, and when James looks at him, he's smiling faintly. "And we all see it, even if we don't say it. So... thanks."

"No problem." James doesn't really know how to feel about any of this conversation. After some time, the sun rising over them and the bitter cold of the night beginning to leech from their bodies, he finally finds the right words. "I don't think I realised that the war and everything were real. That people actually got hurt out there, because of things they didn't have that I did."

"Until Sirius."

"Until Sirius." James watches a cloud drift north above.
"And every day I..." He trails off.

"You?" Remus prompts.

"I wonder if I've done things I can't take back. Like maybe if I'd been there for him more, asked him more questions... he would've told us. Whatever it was he was hiding."

Remus stiffens. "Maybe," he says simply. "Maybe. But blaming yourself won't help anything."

"You think so?"

"Yeah. I asked him plenty of questions and he never told me, either."

"Oh."

"If there's one thing he didn't doubt for a moment it was that you loved him." And even as Remus says it, James knows it's a bare-faced lie.

He doesn't call it out. Sometimes, things can be allowed to sit between them unsaid, he thinks.

"Man," James says into the quiet. "I was a shitty teenager."

"We all were," Remus says. He tangles a hand into James' hair, gentle and rough all in one motion. "There's another splinter in my left arm."

"Ha." And James sits up. "Lemme get it, and then we should head back into town, you've got a shift later, haven't you?"

"Forget the Dark Lord." Remus groans and shuffles back to lean against the fence, legs pulled up to his chest, baring his arm. "Sainsbury's is going to kill me before he can get his hands on me."

Padfoot's Army Lads,

Hope you're all doing swell! This is the test letter you asked us to send muggle-style to your PO box. If you're reading this, it worked, I suppose!

Cheers!

- your Friends in/of London <3

"Okay," Lily says, as she locks the door to the flat behind her, striding into the kitchen and taking James' seat beside Remus. "That's all our muggle mail sent out for the day. When do you get paid next, Remus?"

"Friday," Remus says absently, not looking up from his book. It's from the muggle library down the road. Some pulpy action thing to take his mind off everything. "Are we out of stamps?"

"Not yet, but we need to do a food run."

"We should be fine for the next few days," James puts in, leaning against the kitchen counter with a glass of PDQ Swiss Style Chocolate Milk in his hands. The things muggles come up with, it's incredible. "I got some potatoes from the market really cheap this morning. Remus wants to make soup."

"Leak and potato," Remus nods absently, turning his page.

"As if our apartment couldn't get any more Welsh," Lily says fondly. She claps her hands. "Okay. Meeting time, boys."

"Padfoot's Army meeting! Alert, alert!" James raises his voice to say to the world at large. "Red rover, red rover..."

Remus and Lily exchange exasperated looks. As Remus gets up to make more tea, Lily and James bicker over who gets the comfy seat for five minutes, a debate which Lily eventually wins when James realises he can just take Remus', leaving Remus with the heavy, wooden footstool on the end of the table.

Unimpressed, he takes it without complaint. "So."

"So," James repeats.

"So," Lily finishes the sequence. "It's Sunday. Let's recap first."

They go over the news of the week, all new developments. Not much from the Order, whose meetings are starting to feel quite same-ish. More bad news all the time. The Friends had Fenwick on the other night to talk about safety precautions and fidelius charms, and that was the highlight of everybody's week. No news on Sirius, as per usual. Wherever he is, whatever he's doing, he's doing it well.

It's been a month and a half since Hogwarts started up again, and McGonagall is still headmistress, miraculously. Even she seems to know she isn't going to make it much longer, though. At the last Order meeting (Thursday nights, they usually take place), she made some comment about how she expects the next headmaster will be Leighton Allencourt-Flint, a pureblood wizard who recently replaced Slughorn as potion master and head of Slytherin house. He's

a known death eater, of course, to everybody except the public.

For how much mail they've gotten, there's been surprisingly little real news. Hogwarts is a shithole now, apparently -- unforgivables used on students, Blood Quills and blood purity going unquestioned, it's ridiculous, James can't stand to hear about it. The transition of power within the school is still underway, lots of teachers and students alike still unwilling to relinquish their loyalty to Dumbledore. Lily thinks they're all being very stupid for being as stubborn as they are. James thinks it's brilliant. Dorcas' letter made Lily cry when she first read it. Things really have changed, and they're only going to get worse.

"This week," Lily says, when they've finally gotten through all the news. "We should put together a to-do list. A schedule."

"You love those," James comments chopsily.

"I suppose that's why I always beat you in exams."

"Point taken," James agrees. "Okay, what sort of schedule?"

They map it out on a sheet of lined paper, the three of them. Tomorrow is Monday, and Remus has afternoon shifts for most of the week (barring Tuesday, which he booked off), so Lily and James decide those are going to be the times for mail-sorting, re-addressing, post office runs and by-hand deliveries, which they can handle with just the two of them, no need for Remus' wonderful brain.

"We should spend the mornings with the Friends," James says. "Haven't they recently gotten some new contact in Europe, some wizarding folks in Berlin? That could be

useful. If we find a way to get in contact with them muggle-style, they could help us."

"You're just saying that because you like the Friends," Lily sighs, but she notes it down anyway. "You can do that Monday and Wednesday mornings, I guess. Suppose I'll use that time for..." She trails off, chewing on the end of her biro pen. Then, she looks up at the two of them. "Well, I was going to suggest that we use this week for converting our system a little bit. Making the PO box an inbox, not just an outbox."

"Oh, yeah?" Remus says.

Lily nods. "We could," she says, stalling, glancing at James. "Well. The rough plan I've got is that we start printing the address of our PO box onto each of the letters we send out to parents and families and the like. So that when they send letters back via the muggle mail, we'll get them, and we can funnel them through to students. And from there we could start getting contacts from outside of the country, and... and we could expand. Like we've been saying. It would let people get in contact with us, too. We could have them read out our address on 'Direct Action', James."

James is already grinning. "Genius. Every idea you ever have is genius."

"We'd be dead without you," Remus agrees. "Though, admittedly I was starting to think the same thing."

"It would take a lot of copying up labels with our return address." Lily goes back to gnawing on her pen. "And we'd have to seriously be careful when opening letters, in case they're cursed or being tracked, or charmed to listen to our conversations. We'll need every sneakoscope you've got, James."

James nods. "I've got a ton," he says. "Brilliant, absolutely brilliant."

"Oh, it was the obvious follow-on from what we've got already." Lily waves him off. "We should start with that this week, then. You can tell the Friends to distribute our address on Monday morning, when you're there, in time for Tuesday's broadcast."

"Great. Yes. Awesome."

Lily looks up from her notes at the pair of them. "What's our plan for Tuesday?" she asks.

James and Remus exchange looks.

Lily waves a hand impatiently, though she's smiling a little. "The Blacks will be out of Grimmauld place, won't they? Aren't we heisting that mirror you want, James?"

"You know about that?" James asks. He shouldn't be surprised. Sometimes it seems like Lily knows everything.

"I figured it out when you mentioned you'd given yours to him, a while ago. And when Remus booked Tuesday off, it sort of confirmed it." Lily notes something down on her paper. "That's Tuesday's plan, then?"

James nods. "As far as we know, yeah."

"You didn't seriously think you were going to do it without me?" Lily grins at them. "I've got a pretty good plan of action, actually. They've probably got all sorts of nasty hexes along the windows and the roof to keep less-than-purebloods out, but I don't think spells like that are complex enough to be triggered by the entrance of a pureblood blood traitor, James, so you should get in there

first, and Remus and I can keep watch from above, keep an eye out for anybody guarding the place."

"I hadn't even considered that," Remus says, mystified. "You're right, though."

"Spells like that exist?" James asks.

Lily sniffs contemptuously. "Otto Frinton-Smith put a hex like that on the doorknob of the potions classroom in my second year," she says darkly. "I got detention for missing class. It was the first detention I'd ever gotten."

Pads,

Sorry I haven't written in a few days. I think I'm starting to get bloody sick of letters, honestly. I've got so many papercuts my hands are going to fall off.

The delivery service is going really well. We still don't have a name for it yet. I still think Moony Mail is great, but neither of the others agree with me, so that's a dud, I suppose. I hope you're doing okay out there. There's been no news on you lately at all. Even the papers seem to be taking a break from flashing your face about, though your bounty is still up, so we know you're still out there somewhere. None of us have been to Diagon Alley, but apparently you can't move for your wanted poster. It's everywhere.

Remus and Lily are in high spirits, I think, and me too. It's going so well, Pads, you wouldn't believe it. We've had over a hundred letters in so far, and tomorrow evening, they're going to publicise our mailing address on 'Direct Action'! How cool is that! If you're listening, I'm sure you'll hear it too! Bet you're proud of us. I hope so, anyway.

I'm mostly writing because I'm really nervous about tomorrow, actually. Not about 'Direct Action' or anything. I'm mostly worried because... well. We're doing something sort of stupid, the three of us. We've agreed (Remus, Lily and I) that we're going to try to break into Grimmauld while your family is gone tomorrow, Sirius. To get the other mirror. We know it's probably not there, but we figured... well, it's worth a shot, right? You didn't have it with you at Rosier Manor, so unless they destroyed it... well. We're going to try anyway.

Between you and I, and you can't tell Remus I said this, I think Remus is mostly so up for it because he misses you so much. I mean, I'm known for my stupid ideas, but he's not, and he's got to know this isn't a smart thing to do. He's doing it anyway, though, so that says about all that needs to be said. Lily's coming along because she figured us out and probably knows she can't convince us out of it, so better to come along and rescue us if we need it, right?

Anyway, it'll just be me going in, so. I think I know which window is yours, I'll climb into your old room and start there. It'll upset me, I think. To see your old stuff. But maybe it'll be good for all of us, too. Even if we don't get the mirror. Maybe it'll motivate us like it did when you first went missing.

Remember that we think about you all the time, Pads. I hope you know that. Knowing you you're bloody loving it, right? But I've been doubting that lately, too. How close could you have felt to us if you didn't tell us about... anything? The more we learn about... well. Anyway. I don't know what I'm saying. I don't blame you, if that's what it sounds like. I just miss you a lot.

Stay safe out there! You must be with some pretty strong people if they can keep you hidden without magic for this long. Unless you've found some way around the trace? Ha, like you'd need to. You could whack those death eaters silly with only your fists and your force of will, I know you could.

I love you. Keep listening and watching for us! We're never far away.

Yours,

Prongs.

Lily and Remus perch on the rooftops of the houses either side of 12 Grimmauld Place, as James edges warily along the top drainpipe. The street lurches up at him, leering, the height of the drop utterly daunting.

Luckily, James has never been afraid of heights. He is rather worried a muggle is going to look up and see him, though, so he keeps up a good pace until he's right above Sirius' window.

"I won't be long," he turns to call over to Lily, who is watching him intently.

She nods. "We can't afford to be long," she says. "Go!"

Nodding, James sits on the ledge and shuffles his legs down, down, down the dizzying drop. He feels the wall give and then hears the heels of his trainers squeak against glass. Slowly, carefully, hands planted on the ledge, he twists, then drops his feet down onto Sirius' window pane.

Thank god for old houses. The ledge under Sirius' window is wide enough to crouch on. James shuffles onto his knees and squats there as he jimmies the lock with one of Lily's hairpins which she has no use for anymore. Then, holding his breath, he nudges the window open and slips inside.

No alarm rings out -- there is no angry crack of apparition. Sirius' bedroom is fiercely dark compared to the glaring autumn sunlight of the roof. James lands on the bed, which is pushed right under the window, and the sheets sink under him. It's unmade. Dust springs up into the air with the movement.

Dust covers everything, actually, now that James looks around. There's a clear half inch of it on top of the cupboards and the bedside table, and it's worked itself into the folds of the bedding. Robes are strewn across the floor like they were only left there yesterday. Sirius' trunk sits open against one wall, their fourth-year textbooks sitting inside.

There's a picture of the four of them -- Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs -- pinned to one of the bedposts, arms around one another, grinning. It's from sometime during fourth year, James thinks, as he pries it loose from the wood. Sirius' skin is more tanned than any of the Blacks that James has ever seen, and his hair is still short, only falling to just above his shoulders, flopping around his handsome face in the wind. The last time James saw him, it was about a third of the way down his back.

On impulse, James pockets the picture. For later. He can think about it later. This isn't a game, he reminds himself. It's a mission.

He begins rifling through the drawers for something, anything, tearing open the ornate cupboards that line the far wall. Half of them are stuffed with old notes -- letters, parchment, notebooks, journals. James does his best not to get wrapped up in them, knowing he should be keeping a one-track mind about this whole thing, but at some point, he can't help but stop and rifle through some of Sirius' old writings. He wrote a lot, James realises absently. He wonders how he never noticed that about him before.

Remind James that he needs to get a present for Marlene for her birthday, one note says. James can't recall what year it must have been from. Another simply reads, *nicknames for James: antlers, rudolph, prongs, prancer*.

One of the journals, stuffed to bursting with pictures, finds its way into James' hands without him particularly intending it to get there. He stares down at it guiltily for a moment. Being in here, imagining the summers Sirius must have spent here, how it must have felt, feels oddly like staring unwarranted into a stranger's soul. Like if he looks close enough, he will have violated some unspoken rule and fucked the friendship up.

Like it can get any more fucked than this, James thinks then, and, reinvigorated, he opens the journal.

SCHOOL, the front page says. *PROPERTY OF SIRIUS ORION BLACK*. The page after that is titled *September 1st, 1971*.

Arrived at Hogwarts this evening. Sorted into Gryffindor. I expect the letter disowning me will arrive tomorrow morning, or tonight if I'm lucky. Made some friends. Here, Sirius has crossed out 'friends' and replaced it with 'acquaintances'. The tower is nice. The beds are more

comfortable than the ones at home. Worried about Regulus for a while. Sleep time.

James flicks through the journal a little ways. It seems to end on *April 24th, 1974*, the last journal taking up the back page.

Got detention from McGonagall, this entry reads simply. Prongs is stuck cleaning trophies. I'm mucking out the owlery. Remus confronted me again today. Don't know what to do. Stole some dreamless sleep from Pomfrey. Quidditch practice tomorrow. And just like that, it ends.

Something hard hits the window. James whirls around in time to see another rock hit the glass. Shit. He's taking too long.

Invigorated by a new, manic sort of rush, James shoves the journal and three others into his jacket, not taking the time to look at them. Then he slams the drawer closed and tears through all the others. No mirror. *Shit.*

Thinking fast, James tiptoes as fast as he can out of Sirius' room to the landing. He hovers on the doorstep for a moment, looking around, straining his ears. There's no sound in the house. Go, go, go.

He pads across the hall to what looks like Regulus' room. It's significantly neater inside, though just as abandoned, almost like it's been frozen in time. Thick dust hangs on the air. The Slytherin hangings give the whole place a wet, heavy sort of look, like the bottom of a dirty ocean.

It won't be in there, James decides. Regulus wouldn't have it. Sirius didn't trust him that much. Somebody must have taken it.

Throwing caution to the wind, he leaps down the stairs two at a time, onto the next landing, which houses still more bedrooms, as well as a study. The study has dark wooden walls and a golden-tailored desk which shines sleekly in the light through the window.

James tears into the room, throwing open the drawers behind the desk and rifling through them. Parchment and stray quills, and a signet ring, and two spare wand handles, encrusted with stones and jewels. A heavy silver knife that folds into itself, the top of the handle emblazoned with a skull which grins up at James. James pockets it. *Mine*, he wants to tell Orion, even though he's been dead for months now. *This house isn't yours anymore. He isn't yours anymore.*

And at the very, very bottom of the bordeau, tucked into the back of the bottom drawer, James' hands catch on it. He yanks the drawer fully out, taking it off its hinges and letting it clatter to the wooden floor.

Inside, the broken shards of Sirius' mirror blink up at him. James catches a glimpse of his own startled face in the glass.

Fuck.

Then, downstairs, something clangs.

"Shit," James breathes. As quietly as he can, he scoops up the pieces of glass and deposits them into a side pocket of his bag, cradling them gently between his fingers. Then he straightens up and, very tentatively, takes a step.

Mercifully (thank Merlin for old houses), the floor doesn't creak.

James pads silently towards the door, hardly daring to breathe. Once there, very gingerly, he pokes his head out of the study.

There's nobody on the landing with him. The house is silent again. James strains his ears -- nothing.

He takes a very tentative, very quiet step out onto the landing.

Down in the kitchen, something moves. James freezes.

Footsteps, surprisingly light, pad around downstairs. Somebody's mumbling. James strains to listen.

"...Master," somebody is saying, in a wizened, creaky voice. "And what would my mistress say? For shame, Kreacher, for shame..."

The miserable voice tails off with a breathy sob. James realises then -- with no small amount of relief. *It's just the house elf.*

Slowly, he creeps closer to the banister, peering over. From here, he's got a decent view into the kitchen.

Inside, Kreacher is pacing back and forth across the stone-tiled floor. Every few seconds he whacks himself across the face with a tiny, balled-up fist.

"Shameful," he scolds himself thickly. "Shameful, keeping secrets from Kreacher's mistress, disgracing Kreacher's late master. And yet if Kreacher does not, the young master will..." *SMACK* again. *SMACK. SMACK.*

James lowers himself tight to the floor, praying Kreacher can't see him in the dim light, and continues to watch,

transfixed and horrified in equal measure. His family were never rich enough to dream of owning house elves. It's a trait of the old houses, and of wizarding pubs and hotels, but not of the average family, even of purebloods, not by a long shot. He never knew they would treat themselves like this.

Then, Kreacher draws himself up to his full height, ceasing his pacing. "No!" he snaps at the empty room. "Master Regulus needs Kreacher, and Kreacher must be loyal, must be trustworthy... Kreacher is a good elf. Kreacher is a good elf. To loyal, pure master Regulus, yes..." And he stoops to pick up a cloth bag James hadn't noticed before, sitting at his feet. James squints. He thinks it must be full of something heavy.

With one final, forceful smack to his own face, Kreacher pops out of existence. James is alone again.

Up on the roof, Remus and Lily are frantic with worry. Remus looks like he might burst into tears when he sees James' head stick up over the side of the building, and the sun is blindingly bright across his pale face.

"I'm okay," James reassures, chin scratching the ledge, before either can ask. "I'm fine."

He has to shimmy back onto the roof himself, a dizzying, terrifying experience, and once he's up there he takes a running leap back over to Remus' side, who catches him even though there isn't really any need. They clamber down the fire escape together and, at the bottom, they meet Lily in the narrow alleyway that connects all the houses.

"Hey," Lily says. "Way to worry us, James, seriously. Don't do that." She launches forwards then, wrapping her arms tightly around his middle, and Remus' fierce grip curls around the both of them, and James is sandwiched in the middle.

"I'm okay," he says into Lily's hair. "Didn't even get seen. I promise I'm alright."

"You were in there for half an hour," Remus says dryly. One of his hands pats the back of James' head, a little like James is a dog. "Forgive us for thinking they'd offed you."

"Apology accepted." James squeezes the both of them tight. "Shit. That was terrifying."

"Was there anybody in there?" Lily asks.

"Nah. Just the house elf. Kreacher." James pauses. "He said... I think he was going to bring something to Regulus, actually. He was hitting himself, really chewed up about it. Kept talking about how he didn't want to disappoint his mistress. To himself, I mean. He didn't even see me. Just got his bag and apparated away."

"Huh," Lily murmurs. "Weird."

"We can think about it later," Remus says decisively. "Did you get it?"

"I did," James confirms. "It's just, it's... it's shattered. Completely broken. I dunno if it'll still work."

"Oh." Face falling, Remus lets him go, and the three of them pull apart. "It was... it wasn't for nothing, I guess."

“Right.” James isn’t ready to tell either of them about the diaries just yet. Later, when he’s less tired, when he’s got time to think things over. *Remus confronted me again today.* Huh. “Yeah, it was... it was worth it. We could try to fix it. I got all the parts.”

“We’ll do our best,” Lily promises, though she doesn’t sound very sure of herself. “We need to get out of here, before we’re spotted. Come on. The metro’s only down the road...”

Arm in arm, the three of them step back out onto Grimmauld Place. The sun has slipped behind a cloud and in its absence, the wind has picked up. It buffets James’ hair back from his face. Remus’ arm in his keeps him grounded. Together, they make for the underground, leaving 12 Grimmauld Place and its ghosts behind them. Like a tomb, it rots in their wake.

Full moon tonight, says an entry towards the end of January, 1974. Our first one together. Peter’s self conscious about his animagus form so I don’t make fun of him to his face but it’s bloody hilarious. I like being a dog. Makes things simpler. Transfig essay due tomorrow.

All of Sirius’ entries are short and simple like that. Dates of homework, notes about how he’s feeling. They’re all obviously not for anybody else’s eyes, which makes it feel very illicit indeed that James is reading them, especially since he hasn’t told Lily and Remus yet.

They’re both asleep right now. It’s very, very late -- two or three in the morning -- and James hasn’t even tried to sleep yet. He knows it’ll evade him. At the kitchen table, he’s been pouring over Sirius’ journals for hours. Two of them are just

school notes, but the other two are diaries. James hadn't even known he kept a diary.

Evans punched James in the nose today, another entry says, a few days after the last. He wouldn't let me heal the bruise. Said it made him look rogueish. Bloody tosser. Mother wrote. She's angry about something or other. Charms paper due tomorrow + astronomy test at end of week.

And the next, dated the fifteenth of February, simply reads: *Riddle wrote.*

James stares at it for a moment. Then, he flips over the page.

The next two entries are very innocuous, just homework reminders and a commentary on a prank he and Sirius pulled. The entry for the twenty-eighth of February, however, reads as follows: *gave Amelie Bullstrode the fourth one.*

Huh.

"Hey," James calls into the empty flat. "Hey, Moony? You still awake?"

There's quiet for a moment, and then creaking. After a minute or so, Remus pads in, rubbing his eyes. "Yeah, Prongs?"

He stops and stares at the diaries. The silence stretches long. Evidently, he recognises them.

"Oh," Remus eventually murmurs.

“Right,” James says. “They were his... I think I found something.”

Padfoot’s Army,

Heard your mailing address on ‘Direct Action’ and thought I should write. I’m hiding out near Dublin right now, in my dad’s old tent. I’ve been on the run for a while, Mary Macdonald, too, since we’re both close enough to muggleborn that they’d get us. I dunno if my dad was a wizard or not, never met him, so for all they care I’m a mudblood, even if I grew up with magical relatives. Mary’s got enough blood betrayal in her own family that she grew up muggle. We’re good as dead if they get us. You know how it is.

We need help, James. We’re out of money and out of options, with no magic or anything. Write back, will you? We could do with a hand.

Cheers,

Marlene McKinnon.

Lily insists that they take Mary and Marlene in. By the look on her face as she does, James knows one thing for certain: she is not going to take no for an answer.

That leads them to now -- first morning of November, a sharp chill on the air, Lily with their mail bag over her shoulder, standing in the doorway.

“I’ll stop off at the post box,” she says, “And I can take a look in the PO box, for any external arrivals. We shouldn’t be too

long to get back, not unless their train is delayed. You two should pull out the camp bed -- it opens up into a double."

"You told us already," Remus says amusedly, leaning against the table in the kitchen. "We'll see you soon?"

"Of course," Lily says, and grins.

"And you're sure you don't want me to come with you?" James asks. "It could just be somebody pretending to be them, Lils, you never know--"

She shakes her head resolutely. "I'm fine, James. I would know that handwriting anywhere."

"But--"

Remus elbows him gently in the ribs. "It didn't set off your sneakoscopes either," he reminds James. "And you put more faith in them than you do in our relationship."

"Shuddup." James sighs. "Stay safe. We'll prepare. This evening I gotta go take the train up to deliver a package to the Cresswells in Liverpool, so don't stay out long!"

"I can take care of the flat on my own," Remus tells James, a little insulted.

"Shh," James tells him.

Lily rolls her eyes at them from the doorway. "Bye," she calls pointedly, and slams the door behind her. James and Remus listen as her light footfalls fade down the path.

Remus rolls his head around to grin at him. "That bed?"

"Oh, shove off," James says. "C'mon."

They're both exhausted. The past week has been spent pouring over Sirius' old diaries, which date up until a week before he vanished, right before the end of their fourth year. The second of the diaries is only a month long. Evidently, Sirius intended to fill it like the first one and never got the chance.

Whatever 'the fourth one' is, they still haven't figured it out. Sirius' writing style is confusing at best and nonsensical at worst. He has a habit of skipping sections of pages and then doubling back to fill them with later dates, seemingly for no reason. One of the pages marked down as having taken place in summer of second year is spotted with blood. It would feel cool and academic and investigative to be doing something like this under any other circumstances. As it stands, it just makes Remus and James feel ill. They have to take regular breaks.

Today will be a helpful distraction; James is sure of it.

It's been just over a week since they first got Marlene and Mary's letter, and since then they've been in a flurry. James rushed off to the Friends to ask for their advice as soon as they got the letter, and Lyric, Gambit and Jeremiah all agreed they should welcome their old friends wholeheartedly. The Order had other ideas, of course, and Moody gave all three of them a half-hour long lecture about Polyjuice and possessions and identity theft and murder and other lovely things. It almost felt nice to be worried about.

Remus was wary, at first. James was ambivalent, hovering in the middle of them both, and Lily was determined to see her friends, evidently even if it meant going against James and Remus. When eventually Remus reluctantly agreed, Lily wrote back to her friends to take the train into London, and that takes them to now.

James and Remus make the bed in comfortable silence. When they're done, the sheets all spread out neat across the mattress, James flops down on his stomach onto one side, and Remus lies down on the other.

"You reckon it'll be okay?" James asks, face mashed into the pillow. "I know you were worried."

Remus shrugs in that way of his that says, *I'm thinking some things you won't like*. He rolls his head around to look at James. "I think," he says carefully, "that this'll be fine. I don't doubt it's them."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, I think it really is them. And I think we should take them in." Remus takes a deep breath and plows on. "What worries me is that if we keep taking folks in, one of these times it'll go wrong."

"A bit early in the game for that sort of worry, don't you think?"

Remus hesitates. "I've been thinking for a while," he says. "About how I could be useful to the Order. Once I come of age."

"You have?" James asks, confused. Remus is sharp as a tack and the smartest of all of them, at least in terms of balance. Lily's got technical knowledge and a knack for making sharp connections, and James is good at people, really good at people, and Remus is enough of both of them that he's invaluable. He balances the muggle and magical worlds well. He would make a good soldier, but *useful* isn't a word James has ever applied to him in his head. He's not sure why.

“Yeah.” Remus glances away, looking determinedly at the wall. “I don’t know if I’m ready to talk about it yet, but I want to help... however I can. No matter what it takes.”

James doesn’t like the sound of that. He hooks an arm through Remus’ and rolls onto his side so they’re closer. “Don’t like how that sounds coming from you, Moony,” he says truthfully.

“Ha.” Remus shakes his head. “Didn’t think you would.”

“You’ll tell me once you have a plan, right?”

Remus doesn’t look at him, still. “Of course I will. I tell you everything.”

You didn’t tell me you knew something about Sirius I didn’t, James thinks but doesn’t say. You didn’t tell me you were trying to figure out what was wrong with him before I even knew something was wrong at all. I had to steal his diary to find that out because he didn’t tell me either.

“C’mon.” Remus rolls off the bed and to his feet. “I want to put a few cans of chickpeas on the stove to simmer. I was going to make a curry, enough to feed all five of us this evening and tomorrow.”

“Aye, aye, chief,” James says, getting to his feet in turn. He follows Remus out. They leave the bed just slightly rumpled behind them.

Marlene and Mary are... different than when James last saw them. It was less than six months ago that they were happy, giggling Hogwarts students, taking PA meetings and making excuses for their missed homework and stressing

over OWLs. James remembers them on the last day of term, piling onto the train beside Lily, arms looped together, Dorcas at their side, laughing about some boy, pointing out of the window and waving to Hagrid out on the platform.

Now, they look like different people. They've both lost weight, bony and sharp where they used to be softer and younger-looking, and there are dark shadows under their eyes. Marlene's got a hard, angry set to her shoulders, and her dark hair is unkempt and greasy. One of her hands is bruised up around the knuckles. At her side, Mary flinches at small noises and her eyes are always a little too wide, like she's watching out for an attack.

It makes James feel intensely guilty when he first sees them. *Bloody hard time you thought you'd had. Look at them. At least you've had a roof over your head.*

Lily, calm and impervious, ushers the girls inside and sits them down at the kitchen table, where they stick tightly to each other. "They've got a tent here -- Remus, could you take it and put it in the second bedroom? Under the bed. Thanks."

Remus complies immediately. He meets James' eyes on his way back out of the room, and he, too, looks mildly horrified, his stare wide and owlish.

"James?" Lily says, rounding on him.

"Tea," James says. "Got it."

"And make it strong," Lily nods. She sits down perpendicular to the girls, hands rested on the table, and speaks to them both in a low voice as James fills the kettle. "Do you want us to turn the heating on? I know it can get cold in here..."

Neither Mary nor Marlene answers for a moment. James imagines they might never speak again.

Eventually, Marlene clears her throat. "We're okay. Thanks, Lils."

Lily doesn't answer, but James imagines she's smiling tremulously as he plonks the kettle down and flicks it on at the base.

As the water begins to roar, hissing through the spout, Lily clears her throat. "I've got spare clothes, if yours need washing. I'll go grab them in a sec. We've got a room set up for you, too. You'll have to share a bed, but..."

"It's fine," Mary puts in faintly. She sounds very overwhelmed. "We haven't had a bed."

"Right. Well, you'll have one here." James turns to lean against the counter in time to see Lily force an optimistic smile across her face. "Somebody wrote you a letter the other day, Marlene -- James, can you go find it sometime today? Before you leave for liverpool."

"I'll dig it out," James says. He coughs into his elbow. "Uh, I'm glad you're both okay. It's good to see you're... it's good. Lily's been worried."

Marlene shoots him a very tired, very sad grin. "Thanks, Potter."

"And you can stay as long as you like," Lily agrees frantically. "As long as you need. Even if we have to move for some reason, you can come with us, or I'm sure the Order can find somewhere..." She trails off. "Well. Yeah. We'll figure something out."

“We only just moved in here,” James puts in. “We won’t be going anywhere anytime soon.”

“Yeah,” Lily agrees. “Yeah, of course.”

Marlene and Mary both look intensely overwhelmed, like everything’s moving too quick for them. Their knees shudder next to one another under the table.. The kettle finishes boiling and James pours them both strong cups of Earl Grey. After he’s given out tea, he excuses himself, escaping to find Remus.

“They look so different,” Remus murmurs to him, as they catch each other in the hallway.

James nods. He watches the ground intently, then looks up at Remus. “They don’t look like the same people,” he agrees. “Jesus. Merlin above.”

Neither of them says it, but on days like this, it sort of feels like this war will never stop surprising them. Like every new day will bring new horrors and things will keep getting worse and worse until they can’t get worse anymore, and by then, none of them will have made it that far. Every few weeks, the world feels the need to wrench James up by his shoulders and scream at him, *the war is going to eat you alive. It’s going to kill your friends and it’s going to eat you alive and nobody’s going to be there to miss you.*

Their hands scrabble against each other between them. James loops their wrists together and relishes in the hot, desperate contact.

“We’re here to help people,” he says, more to himself than Remus. “That’s why we’re doing this. That’s what we can do that the Order isn’t, right? Rescue people. Help them stop being afraid. Give them a place to be.”

Remus nods. His overlong hair is getting so out of control that it almost brushes his hair, sitting in a long, curly mop around his ears. The tight curls brush James' cheek. "And that's what we're going to do. We can't leave Lily out there to deal with this."

"She seems fine."

"Of course she does." Both of them know that she'll cry in the top bunk later, when she thinks they're asleep. Days like this make James wish for Sirius, who never cries. Maybe he did really, though, and that was just another thing James didn't know about him.

Outside, a bird goes swooping past the window. James watches it. An animagus, maybe, or just a hopeful mother, coming in to nest.

"Come on," Remus murmurs to him. "Let's help."

They pad back into the kitchen together. Lily shoots James a faint, thankful smile. Outside, the sun seems to brighten a little against the large window.

"Okay," James says, taking a seat opposite Mary and Marlene. "You don't have to talk about anything you've been through yet. It's fine if you're not ever ready to talk about it. How can we help you feel safer?"

Three days later, James is the one to open the letter. Which, he supposes, is lucky for him. Remus would have probably fainted.

He's just brought back a whole sack of new correspondences, half of them from Hogwarts students and another half sent from the outside world to their PO box.

He, Lily and Remus are sitting around the kitchen table, sorting, and he's on personal letter duty, tearing through each letter labeled to PA and scanning each, sorting them into piles he's labeled in his head as 'useless junk' (bin), 'useful information' (one of Lily's wonderful muggle files), 'reassurance from friends' (on the pinboard on the kitchen wall, along with photographs and other memorabilia), and '???' (usually passed off to one of the others).

Lily is laughing faintly as she shows Remus the funny spelling of an address. Remus is peering over her shoulder. James is relaxed, comfortable, even. Marlene and Mary are still asleep in the second bedroom.

Then, he opens up his fifth letter of the day and freezes.

Padfoot's Army,

Your black dog's with us. He's safe and taken care of. He won't be returning anytime soon, so he's asked us to let you know he's still kicking. Rest assured, we don't plan on losing this fight.

Keep up the good work. This war will be won. Using the muggle post was a fantastic idea. You're good fighters, the lot of you. He's very proud.

Regards,

Venner i Europa.

"Oh my god," James shouts.

Both Remus and Lily startle, turning to stare at him.

"Oh my god," James says again. "Oh, Merlin. Oh god. Look." And he shoves the letter at the two of them like it's burning

him.

Lily and Remus crowd in to read it together. Remus looks barely a few words in when he flinches backwards in his chair like somebody's slapped him, eyes not leaving the paper. Lily's gone so still and stiff it's like she's gone into rigor mortis.

The silence stretches long and thin. When James thinks they've both read it over four or five times, he rips it back off them and dives onto the floor, where one of his sneakoscopes is sitting, waiting, and holds it up against the contraption. The whole world seems to hold its breath.

The dome does not spin or whistle; James' fearful, wondrous face reflects from the glass of its curved side, and it stays dark and silent.

Chapter End Notes

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GRAFTING

Chapter Notes

enjoy! tw: blood, mild gore, violence towards animals, discussion of the cold war + berlin wall, mention of the soweto riots

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

This is how it goes: the night is cold and beautiful, frigid like it's trying to freeze both of them out. Sirius lies in the thick darkness, strewn across a splattering of shade from a tree above, and watches Claude's large shadow just ahead as they perch, frozen, in a patch of moonlight.

They've been staking this patch of forest out for two hours already, and even in dog form, Sirius is starting to ache like he's got a fever, every joint whining like old machinery. The past week has tasted like arthritis or some other muggle thing that only knows how to hurt. Kiruna, Sweden by nightfall is terrifyingly cold. They're only five miles from the city, her lights still filling up the horizon in hazy bursts, but the forest around them is so thick that it feels like it could stretch for miles and miles, right off to the north pole. Snow has started to fall in the past hour, drifting gently through the trees in pure white swirls.

Up ahead, for the first time in so long they might have frozen solid, Claude moves. Their body shifts forward ever so slightly forwards, raring like a car. Sirius watches as a piece of snow gets caught in their curly hair.

Then, quick as a bullet, they burst forth from the bushes, brambles catching atop their shoulders. Sirius snaps to his

feet and scrambles after them, paws kicking up dirt behind him, and they both streak out into the wooded clearing and then they're running. The biting air whips at Sirius' face, threads through his fur. He takes a flying, stomach-churning leap over a fallen log and catches a hulking shape in the distance, huge and monstrous, as it retreats through the trees.

Claude hollers something in French and splits off the other direction into the forest, running the parallel path. Sirius barks and bounds ahead, fluid, and he streams like a river against the forest floor, and he feels like he could be anything; a firework, a hex, a bullet. He bursts through a patch of underbrush and then over another rotten old log. The ground upturns steeply and he gallops drunkenly after the dark shape.

This is the second chase Sirius has been on with Claude. Cold, quiet Iceland feels like it could be years away. They shared a cigarette earlier, trekking through Kiruna together when the sun was still high in the sky. He can still sort of taste it, boiling somewhere dark in the pit of his lungs like it lives there.

Up ahead, Claude comes bursting out of the trees to Sirius' left and throws himself through a tall slathering of shrubbery. The sky seems to lurch. There's a sharp sound of impact, a shout, and birds rise against the night, black and shattering.

Sirius tears through the leaves after them. In the clearing ahead, Claude is swiping at the rougarou with their long knife, shoulders boxed up around their ears. The beast is huge, twice as long as Moony, and it stands on his hind legs like it, too, is trying to relearn every ounce of humanity a person can have in them. Its face twists — it's oxen, it's a

shadowman, red and black, eyes glowing through the darkness like flame, and Sirius is sure magic could create anything it wanted to — and it roars in Claude's face and Claude roars back.

"Sirius!" is one of the words that escapes them. Sirius lunges forwards and takes a hacking bite out of the rougarou's ankle. Bitter and tough like overdone steak. Something crunches down against his back and all the air in him leaves. No more cigarette smoke, he supposes.

Claude kicks him out of the way, boot in his ribs, and staggers at the beast. Sirius goes flying, stabbing at the dirt with his claws, sliding against the rotten leaves. His flank hits a tree and he twists. Behind him, they swipe around one another in frantic, desperate motions, like a badly choreographed dance. In the dim light, Sirius sees the rougarou's ribs flex out against its grey-brown skin. Its flesh stretches, stringy like something melted, around its bones.

Claude lands a lucky hit, plunging their knife down into the rougarou's chest. Its breastbone audibly snaps and it howls and staggers. Sirius snarls and snaps and goes scattering ahead towards its legs, wrangling open his jaw and snapping it around the top of its thigh. Claude takes another swing and buries their knife to the hilt into the rougarou's skull.

Like a republic, the beast falls. Sirius pitches away to avoid being crushed, hears himself whine as his ribs stab. There's blood in his mouth that isn't his own. Claude pulls their knife back out.

"You can change back," they tell Sirius in French. "Unless you'd like to stay like that."

Yes, stay, fight, run, blood, the dog in Sirius' chest says eagerly. He ignores it and fights it and transforms in time to catch himself against a tree, panting, the bark digging gouges against his soft human palm.

"I'm fine," he gasps, before Claude can ask. "Nothing broken."

"Good kid." Claude wipes the blood off on their pants. There's a twig stuck in the folds of their jacket. "Good job, too."

"It's dead?"

Claude nods. "It's dead," they say. "Sit. Harvest time."

"I can help."

They grin sidelong at him. "You can watch," they say, "and you can learn."

"Okay," Sirius murmurs. He sits down in the long grass, in the dead leaves, and watches Claude pull plastic bags and knives and tweezers out of their jacket, laying them out on the cold, dark, wet earth. Frost sets in and he watches as they cut open the dead rougarou, peeling the skin of its chest apart in sickly strips. Its ribs sit close to the top of its chest, and beneath them, its lungs still twitch weakly.

"Just nerves sending signals," Claude explains, as he cuts each rib open with a pair of pliers, bagging up the pieces of bone. "She can't feel it."

A small mercy. "I thought rougarou were American," Sirius says.

“They are. This one,” Claude says, “was imported. Smuggled illegally. She belonged to a group of rogue ex-soviet wizards. Dunno how she got to Sweden, though. Ours now, I suppose. The hair goes for ten galleons a gram.”

“How did you know it’d be here?”

Claude cuts the pulsing canal at the top of the creature’s left lung. Watery blood spills across their dark fingers. They handle bodies like bakers handle bread dough. “She killed two muggles last week,” they say.

“Oh.”

“Don’t sound so surprised. The amount this sort of thing happens would shock you. Somebody snuck a pack of nifflers into Soweto, South Africa last week and it was a big trouble for everyone involved.”

“Why nifflers?”

“Shiny things, isn’t it?” And Claude laughs their wonderful laugh. *You’re enamoured*, the dog says. *You don’t want to be who you are.* “They could find all the barbed wire you might miss if you went by night. And they can sniff out gold teeth.”

They hike back to the city by sunrise. Claude leaves the dried blood on their hands, though Sirius knows they could clean it with a flick of their long wand. Maybe it would feel like a disrespect to *scourgify* something so expensive. The hard white sun will rise soon, but for now, the world is dark and reflective. The snow falls heavier now, and it casts all the lights of the city into strange, whirlpool shapes. Long shadows stretch through the woods. By the time they make

it back to the road, Sirius has got a sore on the outside of his right foot.

"Might transform back," he mutters. "Feet hurt."

"We're not far from the apparition point," Claude promises. Both of them are laden down with heavy plastic bags which are hard to carry since they're knotted thrice at the top. "I'll have you back in Reykjavik by noon, we just need to stop off at Cannes first. Alright?"

"Okay," Sirius agrees faintly. The long white road stretches ahead of them like a vein into the dusky blue morning.

"I've never asked," Claude says, "where did you become an animagus? At Beauxbatons they don't teach that magic."

"Not at Hogwarts, either," Sirius says. Then, because they feel Claude probably wouldn't have anything bad to say about it, "My best friend back home is a werewolf. I learned so I could have fulls with him."

"I see."

"Haven't seen him in..." Sirius counts in his head. "Eighteen months, maybe a little more."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I'm sure he's better off."

Claude claps his shoulder with their huge hand. "That's the spirit. No time for complaining. I should take you on hunts more often."

Sirius privately agrees. The thrill of it casts the whole world into a light he hasn't seen it in since second year. For a

while on these nights, it feels like the world is glowing. Their last hunt was for a stray pogrebin in the depths of the Russian steppe and it took them seven hours to snare the thing. Sirius still remembers how its bulbous, fleshy skull pressed like a blister against the net.

"You'll be a great hunter, once we've got this trace thing figured out," Claude promises.

"Yeah." Sirius smiles down at the snowy ground. Snow whips against his face. "Galina says she's taking me to talk to her wandmaker friend next week. She wants to test out those cores you said would work."

"Will she want me there?"

"I think so."

"I'll clear my schedule."

Sirius opens his mouth to speak, then closes it, reconsidering. Eventually, he says, "you don't have to do this, you know."

"Do what?"

"Help me. I know how expensive that stuff is."

"We had a deal, didn't we? No going back on it now." Claude huffs a laugh and adjusts the sack of organs slung over their square shoulder. "You're a good helper. I'll keep good on my word."

"I just hope it works," Sirius confesses.

"Galina wouldn't let you do it if she thought it wouldn't work," dismisses Claude. "It'll work."

“Right. I hope so.”

“Worrying about it won’t make it any more likely to succeed.”

Sirius uses his free hand to rub at his wand arm, right above where the veins sink beneath a layer of flesh and white fat, disappearing into him. *There*. “Yeah, well, that never stopped anybody,” he says. “When we get back to your place, I need to write a letter.”

“Of course,” Claude agrees. “You can do that while I get this bottled up. Just as long as you don’t drop anything.”

“Thought you said I was good at this?”

“I like to flatter you,” Claude dismisses. Their sharp, cheekbone face twists with a grin. “Makes you work harder. Come, now. Apparition point is just over that hill.”

They continue their trek through the blueish morning. Snow pelts heavy against Kiruna on the horizon, the clouds above blurring with it, smearing down against the long dark stretch of the forest for miles around. Mist hangs low. The first traces of sunlight have begun to blush against the horizon.

The apparition point is a tall, knobbly tree trunk set to the side of the one-lane road. A low-shelf, blubbery smell like gasoline hangs off the air. The air tastes a bit like sweat. Off in the distance, a farmhouse has a single window lit up, casting golden yellow light out into the indigo of pre-dawn.

“Sit,” Claude instructs. “I’ll apparate the stuff over and get it into my apartment. Shouldn’t be more than a few minutes.”

“Right,” Sirius says, and sits on the stump. Claude takes his bag from him and then they disappear with a snap like a broken leg. A few flecks of snow fall in their wake.

Sirius is wearing one of Galina’s coats, and he pulls it tight around his midriff. It’s cold, but not cold like Iceland is cold. He watches a figure in the window of the farmhouse move around in their kitchen, getting ready for the day. It can’t be after six yet, by the colour of the horizon. Miles away, Kiruna mutinies against the heavy sky.

Tomorrow is *Direct Action* day, the second one of November. Sirius wonders if James will be back on, or maybe one of the other two. Surely they’ve gotten Galina’s letter by now? He wonders whether they’ll have even read it. They must be getting tons of letters by now.

You’re not alone, James’ voice whispers in his head, the colour of forgiveness. *You never have been*.

Yes, Sirius thinks. Yes, they will have read it.

Moony,

This is the first time I’ve written to you since I left Britain. It’s been, what, three or four months? I feel sort of bad about that, but knowing you, you wouldn’t mind, right? Anyway. Sorry.

I don’t really know what to say. You were right, I suppose, if hearing that makes you feel better about any of it. You were right about pretty much everything you said. You were right that I was doomed and you were right that I was being stupid, and you were right that I was going to die or end up hurt if things kept going the way they did. Every argument we had, you should have won. You never guessed

the full horrible extent of it, and I'm glad you didn't, Moony, because... well. I would've thought you were a superhero, wouldn't I? Or just really good at legilimency. Even as I write this nobody knows the whole truth. Us Blacks are famously good occlumens.

I'm waiting for my friend to finish bottling up a rougarou we killed this morning. It was more them than me, to be honest. I just sort of ran around and bit the thing a few times. It was fun in the way you imagine diving off a cliff would be fun. Short and terrifying. They live in Cannes. The sun is rising and I'm sitting at their kitchen table watching it come over the windowsill and down across the red sink and over the wooden floor. You don't need to hear this but (as previously stated), I don't know what to write.

I ended up throwing out tons of the letters I wrote to James. I dunno if the stuff I did end up keeping even makes sense. What do you say, when it's like this? What are you even supposed to do? I'm not sure if I feel more guilty about not telling him anything, or not listening to you whenever you told ME anything. Ha. Look at the three of us. I never thought a gaggle of teens could be so dysfunctional.

I turned seventeen the other day, by the way. Did you guys remember my birthday? Bet you pilfered some alcohol and got drunk just like we said we always would. Pot, too, just like you and I in the greenhouses back at Hogwarts. You always said it helped the transformations and I always knew you were lying. Funny, that. You still kept saying it anyway. I don't think we ever understood each other as much as we did when we took our first full moon together stoned. End of March, 1974. You tried to tear my arm off and I knew who the both of us were and where we stood.

Have you heard the new Bowie album yet? Suppose it's not new at all, now. It would've come out while you were all still at Hogwarts. My friend has a record player (other friend (I have so many, ha)) and we listened to it over and over last week. 'Some of these days, and it won't be long, gonna drive back down where you once belonged, in the back of a dream car twenty foot long...' And I don't remember a lot of the rest. It was nice, though. James never liked Bowie much, but you've got better taste than him, so. I hope you liked it like I liked it.

I have to go soon, I think. I need to be back in Iceland soon (what a life I live) to sleep and then get back on comms. I dunno when I'll write to you next. When I feel less guilty about it all, probably. If you were here you'd tell me not to feel guilty at all but it'd just be to spare my feelings, not because you actually thought I should stop. You always were the nicest of the four of us. Peter's sweet and James is a people pleaser but you, Remus Lupin, would have forgiven me for putting your head through a wall if I only said 'sorry' after.

Bye, Moons.

- S.O.B

Sirius gets three hours of restless sleep on Galina's sofa that morning. He dreams of tall, red-eyed oxen and David Bowie songs. He dreams he died in Rosier Manor and that's where he's decomposing, rotting into the mahogany floorboards, white marble dust raining over like snow. He dreams he's on the run for a crime he did, in fact, commit, which makes the idea of running feel so much worse.

“Hey, you,” Yí’ān says, and sits on his legs. Sirius wakes and his brain lurches like a vagrant. Iceland. Sofa. Quiet. Snow. Riddle’s not here. *You’re okay*. “Up you get. There’s work to be done.”

“I’ve been asleep—” Sirius casts a glance at the clock on the wall. “Three hours.”

“And that’s two hours too many for a power nap, which is what you said you were having. Up, c’mon. I’m dragging you off to Germany.”

“Germany?”

“Distress call.”

“Didn’t know I came with you on those,” Sirius says, mildly confused.

“You don’t.” Yí’ān’s face hardens around his smile. “Thought you should start now, just in case... well. You’ll be able to use magic again soon. So. Up you get.”

“I can’t get up while you’re sitting on my legs,” Sirius grumbles.

Yí’ān shoves a jacket in his face and stands up. “You’ll be a dog for this,” he says.

“Why?”

“They’re only expecting me.” Yí’ān grins. “Shame I’m a cat person, I suppose, but you’ll do.”

He offers a hand to pull Sirius off the sofa. Sirius takes it and Yí’ān dumps him onto the hard floor and laughs at him. Sirius flips him off, trying and failing to take Yí’ān’s legs out

from under him. One of these days he'll win. Today, evidently, is not his day.

Fifteen minutes later, they apparate into an alleyway in Berlin. The East side, Sirius thinks, though he can't be sure. Yí'ān shuffles him into a shadowy alcove behind a plastic bin and Sirius shifts into the dog, yipping softly, and nips at Yí'ān's jeans with his teeth.

"Okay, you mangey bastard," Yí'ān mutters. "Follow me. Look... doggish. They might recognise an animagus."

Yí'ān steps out of the alleyway and goes striding off down the street. It's a shopping district, middling clothes stores lined like septic wounds along either side. Mostly deserted. One of the shops is boarded up with dark wood that almost looks like a hovering, lurking person if you see it out of the corner of your eye, Sirius notices, as he pads along at Yí'ān's side.

To his credit, Yí'ān is extraordinarily good at looking like he belongs here. He's wearing a long coat, dark with pinstripes, and it whips around at his calves as he digs his hands into his pockets. Sirius reminds himself to steal those boots sometime. They look cool, like something a muggle rockstar would wear.

They only pass two people on that stretch of road — an older woman who crosses the street to avoid them, and a young man with shifty eyes who jogs past with his hands pulling his coat tight around himself. It's not a particularly cold day, though it frosted overnight, and some patches of cement that the daylight can't reach glitter silver with ice. Sirius sees a third person as well — a figure in one of the windows above a boarded-up shop, pale face staring down

at them. He almost yips to Yí'ān, then figures he shouldn't. Just in case.

They turn a corner onto a narrower sidestreet, ducking under a hanging clothesline thick with wet bedsheets that flutter limply in the wind, too heavy with water to list on the breeze. Sirius snaps his teeth at a pigeon and it goes soaring off into the slate-grey sky. *Magic could do anything if it wanted.* So much for magic; this place rots of misery like a pile of old milk teeth. It's grey and brown and silent, very silent. Sirius doesn't know much about muggle politics, but through his time with Galina, he knows one thing for certain: this place has known suffering just like he's known it, and it rots within its pavement and its walls like it rots in him.

Distantly, something is ringing, faint and high-pitched. Sirius can't tell if his own ears are ringing or if it's something else. Something sinister like the whistle of a falling bomb or something.

Yí'ān reaches down to scratch the back of his neck absently. "Down, boy," he says, sounding distracted. "We're almost there."

The dog's brain has the capacity to be far simpler than Sirius' sharp, human one, so it latches onto that. Sirius goes back to jogging along close to Yí'ān's side. Birds are lined along the spiked ledges of rooftops above. The end of the street approaches, and the bright, grey sky opens up beyond it. Sirius imagines that if he could only climb one of the tall, squashed-up buildings around here, he could see all the way back to Britain. Everything feels taller when he's like this.

They make it to the end of the alleyway. Yí'ān steps out onto the stone and pauses, glancing left and right. Then he crosses the following street, which is wider and more open, concrete pavement giving way to a two-lane street, though there are no cars but for broken down old Wartburg Knight parked across the road, thick with dust and soot, its windows so grimey that they're impossible to see through.

They reach the other end of the street. Yí'ān stops in front of a boarded-up shopfront. No, not a shopfront, Sirius realises vaguely. An old cafe, long-since closed.

He raises a hand and knocks on the front window twice.

For a long while, nothing moves. Nobody replies. Sirius wonders whether this will have all been for nothing. He almost wishes it could be. Then they could both go home and leave this place and forget they'd ever been here.

Then, a face looms up to the dirty glass, pale and stark. Wide eyes pierce through at Yí'ān for a few moments, scanning him. The door opens just a crack, and Sirius realises a very thin slit has been cut in the boards, so they can retract into the door. Clever.

"Come in," a low voice murmurs, heavily accented. "You're the Icelandic one?"

"That's me," Yí'ān says cheerily. "Glad to see you on your feet, ma'am." He steps up into the doorway and whistles, clicking his teeth. "Padfoot, with me."

Obediently, Sirius shuffles in after Yí'ān, sticking tightly to his leg. The daylight of outside sways and the door closes behind them and then it's gone, and the angry darkness of the inside consumes the room.

In dog form he's still big enough to see over the top of tables even when he's sitting, but this room makes him feel especially overlarge. Everything is cramped together — tables and chairs are piled against the back wall, and the middle of the room is occupied by a pile of heavy trunks, laid atop one another like bricks in a wall.

The figure standing before the both of them is a woman, fifty or sixty, perhaps, with large, pale eyes and very dark shadows slashed through her gaunt face. She's rail-thin and has the distinct appearance of somebody who hasn't slept properly in years.

"We came as soon as we got your signal," Yí'ān says, endlessly cheery. Probably to calm her down. "What can we do to help, miss...?"

"Meyer," the german woman says thickly. "You're alone?"

"Just me and my dog." Yí'ān glances down at Sirius.
"Padfoot, sit."

Resolving to himself that he's going to get Yí'ān back for this later, Sirius sits, whining in the back of his throat. He does his utmost to look as non-threatening as possible.

"An animagus?" Miss Meyer asks suspiciously.

"No, miss," Yí'ān says. "Nope, just a dog. A very well-behaved boy, though, aren't you?"

Sirius lets out a doggy sneeze and tries to look at clueless as he can. Miss Meyer seems to relax just slightly.

"I'm glad you're here," she says. "It's... it's..." Her pale eyes fill up with tears. "Please, come with me."

She leads Yí'ān into the back room. It looks like it was once a kitchen, but it's been converted — the window is boarded up, the wallpaper has been torn off the walls, and there's a single sofa and an armchair in there. Cautiously, Yí'ān sits on the sofa, and Sirius jumps up to sit beside him, where he scratches Sirius' ears absently. Miss Meyer takes the armchair, hands wringing in her lap like she's trying to keep them from reaching out and tearing her own hair out.

"Would you like to tell us what happened?" Yí'ān asks gently. "If it'll help."

"Yes." The woman snuffles. "Yes, yes. Of course. My partner — he's a squib — and I, we... we used to run a small apothecary in West Berlin, before..." She trails off, eyes going haunted. "Well. Since we were forced to move to the East, we've been living as muggles. There isn't access to the magical community on this side of the wall, you see, so most of us are in hiding. The bravest of us try to smuggle food, money, supplies, people over. Most of us don't. We know it's not safe out there, not even for us."

"I see," Yí'ān says gently. "Is this place your cafe?"

"It was. We had to close," Miss Meyer says stiffly.

"What happened this morning, miss?" Yí'ān asks. His hand on Sirius' head has stilled. Sirius fights the doggish urge to whine.

Miss Meyer shakes her head. Her lip trembles slightly. "One of the men," she says. "Who smuggles the— the muggles, he takes them over to the West for money. He's not a good man. We never got along with him. He died this morning."

"I see."

“Nobody knows who did it. But they came this morning, and they... they took him. My partner.” Miss Meyer breaks down sobbing, hands pressed to her pale face. Her shoulders tremble like she’s going to snap apart. “I don’t know what they’re going to do to him— I tried to fight them off, but they— they—”

Yí’ān pokes Sirius in the ribs gently. Understanding immediately, Sirius slips off the sofa and pads over to Miss Meyer, resting his chin on her knee. He gives her the saddest, sweetest stare he thinks he can muster in this form.

It works, somewhat. Miss Meyer wipes her eyes, reaching down to rub the top of Sirius’ head with her hand. “You’re very sweet, aren’t you?” she asks. The tears swim back into her eyes. She’s utterly broken.

Sirius yips softly. He sits at her feet and keeps his head rested there. If Yí’ān brought him here to be emotional support, that’s what he’ll do.

“Do you know where these men might have taken him?” Yí’ān asks gently. “There’s no pressure at all if you don’t, of course, but it might help us.”

“They have a basement across the city.” Miss Meyer sniffs. “In the south. I can give you the address...?”

“That would be absolutely perfect,” Yí’ān says sincerely. “You should stay here for now, if you think it’ll be safest.”

Miss Meyer nods. “I’ve added protections,” she says. “If you would have tried to enter without my permission just now you would be dead by now.”

“That’s just what we need, then,” Yí’ān says with purpose in his voice, and stands up. “Padfoot’s going to stay here with you—”

Sirius jumps to his feet, barking. *No!*

“Down, boy!” Yí’ān shouts at him. “Sorry, I think I stood up too fast. Padfoot’s going to stay here, because I would be rather uncomfortable taking my pup into battle, if you don’t mind...?”

“Of course not,” Miss Meyer says, looking a little less shaken now. “Do you really think you can...?”

“I don’t think I could hold them off for long,” Yí’ān says. “But I think I can get your partner back to you. You’ll have to flee the city, I can help with that.”

“Where should we go?”

Yí’ān considers. “The south coast of Ireland is pretty peaceful on the wizarding front right now, if you need a place to hide out for a while. I can get you in contact with some lovely Irish folks to help you put up unplottable protections.”

“Thank you. *Thank you.*” Miss Meyer is shaking so hard she might fall out of her armchair. “Why... why?”

Yí’ān smiles softly. “It’s just what we do, miss.”

It takes Yí’ān three agonising hours to come back. Sirius spends half of the time sitting with Miss Meyer as she strokes a hand through his fur and tells him about the war. She’s a witch, but when she tells horror stories, she tells

them like a muggle. She's lived a long, painful life. After she falls asleep, Sirius paces in long, rambling circles through the front room, stopping to plant his front paws on the window so he can peer through the cracks in the boards and watch the street.

What if he just doesn't come back? his stupid human brain taunts him, unprompted. You can't apparate. And will Galina know where to look for you? If those men come back you can't use magic to get out of this, you'll die here. And the others will never know. Nobody will ever know. And it will have all been your fault, and nobody's going to be around to miss you before long.

Unbidden, he thinks of Regulus. What is he doing right now? Something bookish. Something quiet. Sitting somewhere abandoned and writing in one of his notebooks. Staring at astrological charts. Something he could do for hours, undisturbed. Regulus has always been slow where Sirius was fast, quiet and attentive where Sirius couldn't concentrate for more than five minutes. He hates being this morose. Maybe this place just has that effect.

After three hours and fifteen minutes (Sirius certainly hasn't been counting), there's a knock on the door. Sirius leaps to his feet and sees two pairs of legs on the stoop outside. *Bingo.*

He goes bounding into the other room, pawing at Miss Meyer. She startles awake and stares down at Sirius, confused. "What is it?" she asks, straightening her glasses.

The knocking on the front door restarts, more urgent now.

"Oh!" Miss Meyer shouts. She jumps to her feet and rushes into the front room. Sirius hovers at her feet and watches

as she unlocks five different padlocks before throwing the door open.

Yí'ān is bent almost double, arm slung along a tall, balding man's shoulder. Miss Meyer's partner is thin and stickish like her, with similar pale eyes. When he sees Miss Meyer, he lets out a shout of surprise and drops Yí'ān to embrace her.

"Shit," Yí'ān murmurs, staggering and clutching onto the doorway.

Sirius's claws scratch against the wooden floor. He noses at Yí'ān's face, upset. *Tell me what's hurt.* He can smell blood. *No!* the dog in him says. *No! No! No!*

"I'm okay," Yí'ān says. It's around a sharp wince, though. He's clutching his stomach. "Cutting curse got me on the way out, as we apparated back. Not deep."

"I was so worried," Miss Meyer is saying, sobbing into her partner's shoulder. "I was so scared for you. We have to run, Wolfgang. We have to get out of here— we have to go *soon*—"

Yí'ān staggers inside and kicks the door closed with his foot. White-knuckling on the countertop, he nods. "Yeah," he says. "Apologies, the both of you, I don't think I'll be able to apparate you out of here. They'll be here soon. You don't have much time."

"I already packed," Miss Meyer says over him. "Come, Wolfgang. We're going to Ireland."

"I'll send you a letter," Yí'ān pants. "Find a muggle hotel, for now. Lay low. Understood?"

“Yes,” Wolfgang says breathlessly. “Yes— thank you, thank you. So much. I don’t know how to—”

“No thanks necessary.” Yí’ān cracks a broad grin. “All in a day’s work. Agh, *fuck*.”

Wolfgang and Miss Meyer pile out of the kitchen, still tangled together, speaking in rapid German. The second they’re gone, against his better judgement, Sirius changes back, just in time to grab Yí’ān as he stumbles, hands under his armpits.

“Whoa,” Sirius says. “Thought you said it was nothing?”

“Shut up,” Yí’ān grunts. “Change back. I gave you an order, Black.”

“You can’t even stand up. Don’t try to intimidate me.” They both end up on the floor. Sirius watches spots of blood hit the wood. “Can you apparate?”

“Get me something to stop the bleeding.” Yí’ān’s brown skin looks sort of grey in the light. There’s sweat dripping off his forehead down the sides of his face in rivulets. “A towel or something. Quick. Apparition speeds up your heartbeat. Don’t fancy bleeding out.”

Sirius jumps to his feet and races to the back of the room. There’s a cloth covering atop one of the piled-up wooden chairs, linen. He grabs it and hurries back to Yí’ān, who looks sicker by the minute.

“Here.” Sirius stretches the linen out thin and hands it to Yí’ān, who presses it tight against his ribcage. “We have to go. Now.”

Upstairs, the crack of apparition rings out. Miss Meyer and her partner are long gone. Safe. Sirius' ears pop with the rushing sound of wards going down around them.

"Phew," Yí'ān says. He pulls himself up against the wall.

Sirius rushes under his arm to pull him to his feet, taking almost all of his weight. Outside, three cracks sound in the street. A dark figure approaches the door.

"Shit!" Yí'ān shouts, seemingly just to get it out of himself. "Okay. I'm good. Hold on tight, old boy."

"What—" Sirius starts.

The world goes wheezing out from under him. The door flies open but they're already gone. Into the ether they plunge, and everything compresses to the size of a pinprick, and then Sirius blinks and they're swaying outside the apartment block in Reykjavik.

"Fuck," Yí'ān says. He proceeds to pass out.

Dragging your friend's bleeding, unconscious body down two flights of stairs isn't very fun. It also isn't an experience Sirius is particularly sure he'll ever have in common with most people. He imagines, as he hauls Yí'ān down the steps, trailing blood and sweat, that if he ever tells James, Peter and Remus about this, none of them will think it's very funny. Galina isn't in the flat when he finally gets the limp body through the door, hauling him into the living room and dumping him on the sofa. Sirius is alone.

How does one treat wounds again? They never offered a healing class in Hogwarts. Feels like it would have been

useful. A muggle might have known what to do. Sirius was always good at healing spells, but without a wand he's a wet blanket. He peels Yí'ān's sweatshirt off his sweaty, bloodied torso. The wound isn't deep, he was right about that, but it's very long, slashing across the middle of his torso. Moony has one in almost the exact same place, almost just as long.

Pressure. Right. *Focus*. Sirius ties the linen cloth around the wound tight, very tight, and then lurches up to his feet to get Galina's first aid kit, legs half-buckling. Disinfectant. Something to clean it with. There's blood on his fingers already, too much of it. *Shit. Shit. Shit.*

That awful hour passes in a blur. Sirius cleans the wound as best he can, using a wet paper towel to get rid of the blood around it and then cleaning the gouge itself out with warm water and rubbing alcohol. Yí'ān doesn't stir. Checking his pulse becomes a compulsion, like picking at pimples and scratching at scabs. Every two seconds, Sirius makes sure he's still breathing.

After the wound is clean (as clean as it's going to get, anyway, and thank god for magical injuries, Sirius supposes; if there had been a knife involved, it could have been even worse), Sirius dresses it with gauze and wraps bandages around Yí'ān's waist, tying them in a tight knot at the back. Yí'ān is completely unresponsive by this point, but his skin is still warm and he's still breathing. Not asleep, certainly, but not dead either. *Alive. He's alive. You saved him.*

When the apartment door opens, Sirius raises his voice to yell. "Galina! Galina!"

The sound of something being dropped. Galina runs in with her wand drawn, short hair flying around her face. She sees

Yí'ān and all the colour drains from her in an instant. She might as well be a ghost for how transparent she gets.

"He's alive," Sirius says quickly. "I think I dressed the wound okay... he got hurt. On a distress call."

She stares at him for a long moment. Then, she takes a very long, steadying breath. "His pulse is regular?"

"Yeah," Sirius says. "He lost a lot of blood, but it wasn't deep. I didn't know what to do. But I think I did everything right."

"Okay," Galina says calmly. She turns on her heel and walks out of the room. Sirius watches her go in silence. He doesn't think he's ever going to forget the look on her face when she saw Yí'ān. Like her entire world had come crashing down.

She's known him since he was sixteen, Sirius reminds himself. *She's like his mother*. It all makes a little more sense then.

The apartment door closes. Galina bustles into the kitchen and makes two cups of tea. The British way. Sirius sits back against the sofa and stares at the wall, trying to shake the tremors out of his body. Yí'ān doesn't stir.

Warmth. Galina is above him, then, and she presses a mug into his hands. "Drink."

"Thanks," Sirius mumbles. He sips. The tea scalds his tongue, a grounding, pimply sort of pain. She sits down beside him, surprisingly. She's got stature to her, to everything she does. She holds herself a little like McGonagall at the best of times. It feels too casual.

For a while they sit in silence, drinking their tea.

"Are you alright?" Galina asks eventually.

"Aren't you going to check on him?" Sirius asks, at almost the same moment.

They stare at one another. "You first," Galina says levelly.

"Uh." Sirius clears his throat. "I'm okay." He looks down at his mug. The tea is sloshing around inside with the trembling of his hands, still bloodied. He hasn't spilled much, though. "Yeah. I'm okay. It was scary but I'm okay."

"Good," Galina says, in the softest voice he's ever heard come from her. "That's good. And as for him, I trust you. If you say you've treated him, I believe you."

"You do?"

Galina nods. "You've proven yourself nothing but capable."

"I can't even use magic."

"Most people can't." Galina cracks a very faint smile.

"Doesn't make them any less capable. I should get you brushed up on first aid, though."

"Right." Sirius stares out of the window, out over the dull grass, to the greyish afternoon sky. The sun will set soon. It sets earlier each day. Iceland has the wonderful privilege of extraordinarily long nights. It makes each passing week feel drowsier. "I think he'll be angry at me. I disobeyed him."

"I don't think either of us could be angry with you," Galina says. Like it's that simple. "Not if we wanted to."

“Family doesn’t work like that,” Sirius says, and thinks of his father, and thinks of Remus.

“Then don’t call us a family,” Galina says. She finishes her tea and stands up, rubbing a knuckle through Sirius’ hair. “You should get some sleep. We got another call, but it’s a little less time sensitive. I’ll need you up for that tomorrow.”

“Right,” Sirius says. He wipes his eyes. “Claude said they would come when we visit the wandmaker.”

“Oh, did they?” Galina looks mildly victorious. “You must be a good helper. They won’t give up their time for just anyone.”

“I’m okay at it.”

“Don’t be so modest.” In the doorway, she hesitates. “I’ll show you how the distress signal system works sometime this week, too, so you can operate it when we’re not around.”

“We’ve had more calls than usual lately,” Sirius comments.

Galina’s face goes grim. She nods. “Things are getting worse,” she says simply. “But that’s a problem of the morning. Sleep.”

Sirius doesn’t think he can sleep. He nods, though, and rests his head back against the sofa and closes his eyes, tea on the floor beside him.

Surprisingly quickly, the world slips away. It isn’t the best sleep he’s ever had, but it isn’t the worst.

Monsieurmoselle Black,

Thursday you said, wasn't it? Tell Galina to call me and let me know a time and place. I'm eager to get you out in the field again. Hope we're not all working you too hard. Welcome to the resistance.

Seeing you soon,

Claude Archeambeau

“Fantastic news, on the missing persons front!” Lyric booms through the radio. Sirius raises his head from the comms. Outside it’s a surprisingly sunny day. A bird flits past the window into the blue evening sky.

“Indeed,” Gambit says, amused. “And our co-host here definitely isn’t overeager.”

“I don’t think anybody on the planet could quite muster the enthusiasm with which we’ve been told this news,” Lyric laughs. “Yes, staying on topic, we’re very pleased to inform our loyal audience that one young master Black has been confirmed to be alive, safe, and based with resistance fighters in greater Europe. Details of his specific location are unknown — and if we did know, we wouldn’t be bloody well espousing them on the radio, would we? — but he’s alive and kicking, and eager to keep resisting, we’re sure. Black, if you’re out there, keep fighting! We’re behind you!”

“This is Sirius Black, not the... the other one,” Gambit clears up, sounding very amused.

“Oh, to live in a sibling’s shadow,” Lyric sighs. “The travesties war brings, I suppose...”

Moons,

Hark, fair sir! Yet another week without your name in the deathlist on 'Direct Action'. Thank Merlin for that. This is going to sound strange, but I'm really worried you're going to be the first to die. Morbid, huh? I couldn't tell you why. Just... some reason, I guess. It's not like you've got the most to lose. We've all got plenty of that.

It's late at night and I'll have to stop soon because I'm writing by candlelight and it's guttering already. If I cut off suddenly that's why.

Tomorrow, they're going to try to fix my trace thing. They haven't told me much yet, but what they have told me isn't particularly pleasant. I haven't met Galina's Latvian wandmaker friend yet, and Galina seems to have faith in her, but... between you and I, I've spent every day for the past four months (longer than that, honestly) waiting for disaster, anticipating it so it doesn't shock me when it arrives, and I'm not about to stop now.

I don't think Galina would let me die, not unless I've misjudged her, but just in case it does go wrong: I wrote sort of a conclusive thing in James' last letter, about all the things I wanted him to do if I wasn't there, but here's one for you: take care of yourself. Let yourself buy chocolate when you want it. Get a muggle job, if you need it, and don't be ashamed of yourself. You're worthy of love and respect without having to work for it. Don't let any of them tell you that you have to be more than yourself in order to be worth being cared for.

That was sappy, wasn't it? Sappy but true, I guess. There's tons of stuff I want to say to you once we see each other again, but I won't say them all here. I'm saving them up

and holding them close to my chest and they'll all pour out of me and crush you one of these days, and you won't even mind.

And I am really sorry. I know I've been awful to you a few times. So. I'm sorry for that.

Love you, Moons.

- S.O.B

Ventspils, Latvia has two nightclubs, and they both sit opposite one another on the road perpendicular to the city's highstreet. Galina and Claude are both broader than Sirius, and they box him in from either side as the three of them wait in line at the seedier of the two pubs, watching the grimy windows and neon tube lighting flicker. Sirius has his hands buried in his pockets and his head low. He's only wanted in wizarding Britain, but he's still sure somebody's going to point at him and scream and then Riddle is going to appear out of nowhere and drag him off to some forest somewhere. Sit him down by a lake and tell him he's only worth what he can give to him.

"First time clubbing?" Claude asks into his ear. They sound intensely amused.

"You wish," Sirius snaps. It is his first time clubbing, in fact, but Claude doesn't need to know that.

"We're not here to club," Galina says sternly, before either of them can get into an argument. "We're here to get to business. Come on."

They don't get ID'd. The bouncer eyes Galina up and down, eyes flicking over Claude and seeming to miss Sirius

entirely. Then, he gestures them inside.

The club thrums with music. It's all flashing lights in a miasma of colours and the thick, gummy smell of sweat. There are sticky booze spillages all over the wooden floor and bodies press tight to one another. Sirius expects himself to become immediately overwhelmed, as he has been often since everything that happened over the summer, but surprisingly... he sort of likes it. The smell of weed. The crunch of aluminum foil rollies under his feet. The heat. It feels the inside of a very merry, very colourful oven. The wooden walls pulse with sound and light.

A muggle boy grins at him over the crowd, stamping to the music. Sirius grins back, sweeping his hair over to hang from a lower parting. He imagines he looks sort of like a rockstar.

Galina grabs his arm. "No time for that," she says gruffly. "Come, you. Claude."

"Of course," Claude says. They take Sirius' other arm and together, the pair of them wrangle him through the crowds to the back of the club, then up a flight of stairs to the bathrooms.

"Come," Galina says. She yanks Sirius inside the women's toilet and closes the door behind them both. Claude stays outside, presumably to guard from onlookers.

The light in this room, a small space with a single toilet, a sink and a high window, is almost blue-white in comparison to the warm colours of the club. The music pounds, muffled, through the wall. It stinks in here but not strongly. The sharpest smell is of a citrusy sort of air freshener.

There's a woman leaning against the far wall that Sirius has to look twice at. She's got a shaved head and very high, very sharp cheekbones. Her dark brown skin is almost luminescent with sweat and she's in a bright yellow clubbing get-up with a denim shoulder bag. She looks so purely muggleish that, if not for the feeling of *magic* that pours from her in waves, Sirius would think she was a stranger.

She grins at the both of them. "Galina. I was hoping you'd make it." She has a soft, pleasant accent, sort of German-ish, sort of Russian-ish. Sirius can't place it. She, like the rest of them, must be a little out of time. Like she isn't quite sure of where to belong.

"I keep my word," Galina says. She squeezes Sirius' shoulder. "Sirius Black for you. Sirius, this is Dzintara. The wandmaker."

"Oh, I wouldn't go that far," Dzintara says modestly. "I experiment. But sure."

"Hi," Sirius mumbles, feeling abruptly quite shy.

"Let me get a good look at you." Dzintara puts her slim, reedy hands on his shoulders and looks him up and down. She rolls up his sleeves and examines his forearms, which are stark white and a little translucent in the cold light.

"Yeah," she murmurs. "Core from your previous wand?"

"Dragon heartstring."

"Type of dragon?"

"I don't know." Sirius shrugs. Her cold hands tingle on his skin. He gets the odd feeling that he's being hexed, though

she doesn't have her wand out. Maybe that's just the impression she has on people. "They don't tell you."

"Sounds British enough," Dzintara says. "I can work with that. For dragon heartstring... ambitious, lots of range, powerful... that's... hmm. Bring your other friend in, Galina?"

Galina nods. She steps out for a moment, then returns with Claude, who leans against the door from the inside now to keep it closed.

"What materials do you have?" Dzintara asks them promptly, in perfect French.

"I've been collecting," Claude grins. They reach into their jacket and pull out a leather roll-up of small bottles, showing them to Dzintara. "Few shards of unicorn horn, jackalope antler, thunderbird tail feather— I've got dragon heartstring, Peruvian Vipertooth, but it's pretty old and hasn't been preserved very well, blame my last apprentice for that. Rougarou hair, of course—"

It hits Sirius. "You got that for me!" he accuses. "You lied about it being expensive."

Claude shrugs. "I'll still sell the organs. Anyway... curupira hair, too, though it's from a shitty batch, and... ah. Yeah. Few shards of basilisk fang."

"Oh," Dzintara says immediately, on seeing the last core. "Where from?"

"Funny guy I met last year. Don't remember it very well," Claude says. Sirius gets that odd feeling again. Like he's eaten something bad and it's trying to come back up.

"I see." Dzintara reaches out and snags the last bottle. The small, white shards of fang rattle around inside. She rolls it around in her soft, narrow palm. "And the venom has been extracted?"

"Do you take me for an amateur?" Claude asks.

"I take everybody for an amateur. Learned it from her." Dzintara points over her shoulder at Galina. "This..." She holds the bottle up to the light. "Yeah." A quick glance at Sirius. "Oh, yes, this is the one."

"You're sure it's safe?" Sirius asks. He doesn't know a thing about basilisks except for the fact that they're really deadly. And supposed to be extinct, of course, but since when is anything the way it's supposed to be anymore?

"Nothing's ever sure," Dzintara says dismissively. She switches back to English. "Galina, close the blinds? Black, sit."

Sirius obeys. The bathroom floor is filthy. He has a brief moment of clarity. *You're seventeen and you're sitting on the floor of a nightclub in Latvia, letting some strange lady put poisonous snake fang into your arm in an untried ritual.*

"It isn't untried," Dzintara says absently. She sits opposite him and pulls out a lighter and a small metal tripod from her yellow mesh shoulder bag.

"You've done this before?" Sirius asks, almost forgetting that she just read his mind. Nobody's ever done that before except...

"Only once. Don't look at me like that. It worked just fine." Dzintara winces. "Perhaps a little too well."

“What do you mean?”

She eyes him. For a moment, Sirius thinks that she can see right through his soul and out the other side, into whatever hazy darkness lies beyond it.

“It was a while ago now,” she says. Sirius gets the odd impression that she’s a lot older than she looks. “Strange young boy came to me wanting a way around the Trace. British, like you. Rather a lot like you, in fact.”

Ice floods Sirius’ veins. The ceiling spins above him. He needs to lie down all of a sudden, but Claude is at the door and Galina is at the window, and there’s nowhere to go but headfirst into the abyss that does not blink.

“Yes,” Dzintara says, as she lights a little fire underneath her tripod, resting a small, black bottle of a strange potion atop the flame. “Yes, you’re rather a lot like he was.”

“I’m *not*.”

“Mmhm.” Dzintara clears her throat. “I’m not here to offer therapy. Arm out. Wand arm, if you will.”

Sirius sticks out his right arm, watching his veins stick out stark against his pale skin. Dzintara runs reverent dark fingers over it. She’s got long nails, painted some bright, straining colour between orange and yellow.

The potion inside the bottle begins to fizz and spark, bubbling up high. Smoke pours into the air and it taints the blue light a murky, muddy brown. Sirius stares into Dzintara’s dark eyes. She does not stare back.

“This might take a while,” she warns. “It took three days for him to wake up last time.”

“Don’t worry,” Sirius says. *This is your last chance to run.* But he thinks of James and then he just can’t. “I can handle it.”

“That’s what he said,” Dzintara tells him. She fishes in her jacket and pulls out a knife, moulded of some pure, unblemished metal that doesn’t look like it has the capacity to stain. With the quick, no-nonsense efficiency of a surgeon, she slices it down against the grain of his wrist, two inches deep and very long.

“Agh,” Sirius groans. It burns, burns more than it reasonably should. Maybe he’s getting soft, he thinks, as the room spins.

You watch, Riddle’s voice says in his head, *and you learn.*

The smoke has become choking. Sirius lets his head loll low against his chest but does not lie back. He knows he’ll just be dragged up again. The hands on his wrist move and then pinch, hard, pursing the skin open. The muscle inside the wound flexes and twitches, lost from its other half. Two parts of one whole straining to reach one another across the silver knife-drawn valley.

“Don’t twitch,” Dzintara warns him. “This might hurt a bit.”

She uncaps the dark potion and pours a scant drop into the wound. It hisses like oil to fire, smoking and steaming, and the skin seems to bubble.

“That doesn’t hurt much,” Sirius gasps, back teeth grinding against each other. “I’m fine.”

Dzintara smiles over at Galina, very grim. A moment of understanding blossoms between the two. She raises the other bottle, full of little white shards, and drops a single

piece into her hand. Sirius watches her roll it between her fingers — it's barely the size of the nib of a pencil — and then drop it into the gaping, fatty wound.

Sirius has been put under the cruciatus curse twice in his life, which is more than most people, though it's the sort of statistic that sort of necessitates a non-zero average. The first time was when he was eleven and he knocked his father down the stairs. His dad had landed in a crumpled heap at the bottom, for as huge as he was, he was sick by then, sick as he would be for the rest of the time Sirius knew him. Sirius was too young to understand what he'd done, but he was staring down at his father's collapsed shape, robes spread out over the floor like a puddle of blood, and then the entire world was pain.

The cruciatus curse locks up every muscle in you, sets your teeth right on edge. Like biting a fork, it makes every single bone in your body vibrate with wrongness. That's almost the worst part of it. The pain is bad, but the feeling is somehow worse than the pain. The feeling that you'll never be whole again. Like your legs and arms and jaw will never obey you for the rest of your life, not as long as you live.

The second time Sirius was put under the cruciatus curse, he was fifteen. It was his first evening in Rosier Manor after telling Dumbledore, and Tom held him under for long enough that Sirius could almost *feel* himself slipping from the edge of a tremulous cliff into a void he knew he could never claw his way out of. It took him a month to even feel like a human again, rather than a raw nerve or an electrical fire. The afterpains still come back sometimes. He dreams sometimes that he's got brain damage or something. That all of this is a dream and he really did just crack that night.

The pain was the same as when he was eleven, though. Not an ounce of it felt any different.

That's the closest thing Sirius can compare to the pain he feels now. Eleven and fifteen, teeth scraping the carpet, curled against the cold floor and praying for any god merciful enough to just kill him and get it over with.

It's more centralised now, the fierce, birthed-again burn of it starting in his arm and screeching outwards through his bones. The fear is the same.

I will burn you into a husk, Tom is saying, like he's prophesying. Like he's on a mission from god. I will leave you a shell of a person and nobody will care enough to remember you. I'll wipe you from every living memory until it's like you didn't exist at all.

Sirius doesn't remember much of the rest of that night. Somebody stitches his arm closed with soft hands. Someone is screaming and eventually his throat gives out with a hoarse rasp like air let out of a tire and the yelling stops. Black smoke swirls across his vision and somebody lifts him up into their arms, pressing him to their shoulder. Faint warmth and burning cold. Wetness on his cheeks. He's surrounded by music, fierce and throbbing like a heartbeat. There's cold nighttime air on his face. The world twists and evaporates and leaves nothing behind.

Somebody's playing Bowie nearby. Hours pass. Every few minutes, somebody wipes the sweat off his forehead and forces him to drink some water. Occasionally he tries to scream again but his throat won't let him. The pain is like being scalped. Like being torn open. Like being born in reverse.

Dear James, he writes in his head. Jamie. They're going to turn me into a human rapture and nobody's going to save me. Sorry I wasn't better to you. I miss you.

By the time vision returns, it feels like it might as well have been years or seconds. Sirius realises he's lying on the sofa and he's watching the ceiling and he's hot all over like the desert. There's saliva and blood in his mouth and his nose is bunged up. Something around his eyes has crusted like a nictitating membrane.

"Hey," a voice says above him. Strange accent that he can't place. So it could reasonably be anybody he's met for the past three months. "Go back to sleep, okay? Sirius. Sirius, go back to sleep."

Sirius groans faintly. He realises he's got one arm tucked tightly around his stomach and the other guarding it, like it's broken. There's a faint burn mark on the ceiling. He could have sworn it wasn't there before.

"Did it work?" he asks the voice. His own comes out in less than a whisper. A soundless rasp.

A hand rubs the side of his face. "You," they say, "are going to change the world."

And maybe things are never going to get better or change after all, Sirius thinks in the back of his mind, and then sight leaves again and he's gone, gone, gone.

Chapter End Notes

- [Official Tumblr](#)
- [Twitter Quotes Bot](#) (admin: [lupinlesbian](#))
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THIEVERY

Chapter Notes

PHEW! week's wait! apologies lovely folks. it shouldn't be that long again, at least not for a while. we're really getting into the meat of the plot now babes!!

in my time on sabbatical (ha) i was busy nonetheless!
here's the needless self-promo of the hour:

first off, i wrote some oneshots!

[an examination of the golden trio through the years ft. lots of hugs](#)
[in which peter is discovered as traitor a year earlier than in canon \(fix-it\)](#)
[in which regulus is sorted into gryffindor \(fix-it\)](#)
[in which remus and sirius live and get married \(fix-it\)](#)

and i also started a new multi-chapter!:

[it's 1995, the first war never ended, remus lupin kills death eaters for a living, sirius black makes lots of unfortunate decisions, and harry potter is trying to kill them both](#)

okay! now that that's over with: tws for this chapter include mild injury and some dark themes + discussion of trauma.

enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Sirius,

But soft, what light through yonder window breaks? It is the east, and James has got a gun.

Okay, so we don't have bullets or anything. But he's gone and pilfered a gun from one of the blood traitor boys from the Friends of London, this old pistol revolver thingy built in the 1940s, and he wants to drag me to see the Order tomorrow to get one of the aurors to enchant unending rounds into it. He says he'd be too jumpy to use it himself but I don't believe that for a second. Our James? Doubting his abilities? Well. I suppose it isn't so out of character these days, is it, Padfoot?

Anyway, he said I should have it, and I think Lily should, since she's the most sensible. So we're sort of playing hot potato with it right now. I'll be sure to update you on how that goes.

It's been three weeks since we got that letter from your friends about you and Christmas is closing in. James dragged us out to Camden Market the other day to buy you stuff for the holidays (he's convinced we'll have you back by Christmas Eve, or he says he is, anyway). For your information, I got you a notebook and one of those funny muggle cubes that you have to match all the colours along the sides of. Some chocolate, too. James got you a pack of Turkish delight and a set of inkwells, and Lily got you a jacket from a charity shop. They're all wrapped up in red tissue paper under our bed. Just in case. Maybe presents for you will pile up too, just like the letters. So we've got tons to give you by the time you're actually here.

Don't tell James I'm being so fatalistic. I don't think he'd appreciate it. He does so much to keep the morale up, and it works some of the time, admittedly. I think he's better at it than anybody I know, because he's James, and if there's

one thing he's good at, it's getting people to like him. It's just not really enough. Marlene and Mary certainly aren't very drawn in by it. They're... not doing any better. I know I say that in every letter now, but it doesn't change. They eat and sleep and shower and stuff, but they're so quiet now. Like they're waiting for the death eaters to come crashing through a window and take them away. I don't know what happened to them out there, but it must have been awful. Lily's very sad about it.

All the more reason to find you quick, I suppose! Aside from the gloom and doom of all that, and the excitement of the gun, and other such... stuff, there's not much news. We funnel letters through, we take them in return. Any tips we get, we give to the Order. People write us about deaths and disappearances and we tell the Friends. We're comfortable middlemen right now. It won't last, but for now, we're doing alright, all things considered.

There's an Order meeting on Friday night. The Friends have been invited, too, and it's in a different location to the usual place. Something special, we all assume. Either somebody's died, or... well. We can't think of any other reason it'd be like this. So we suppose somebody must have.

Stay safe out there, Padfoot. You would be surprised how often I think about you.

Remus.

Marlene and Remus are both early risers as of late. Remus has never been particularly good at getting up early, but for the past few weeks, he's been rising with the sun. He thinks

it must be something to do with the moon, which is swiftly on its way, only three days away now.

They've taken to having tea together in those early mornings, sitting quietly in the large bay window in the kitchen, looking out over the city. It's early enough that the heating in the apartment block hasn't come on yet, but late enough that the sun has started streaming through the city, peaking through gaps in buildings, peering into their shabby little kitchen.

They don't talk much. There isn't much to talk about.

Today might be different, though, Remus thinks, as he makes each of them a cuppa -- his black with two sugars, Marlene's white and milky, only shown the teabag for a tick. Marlene's got one of their blankets wrapped around her shoulders, knees pulled up to her chest, but her gaze as she stares out of the window is a touch harder than it usually is. Fierce and sharp, like the world has wronged her.

Remus hands her the mug and sits opposite her. "Did you sleep well?" he asks.

"Nah," she says, taking a sip. "You always get my tea right, Remus."

"You take it like James takes his."

Marlene eyes him. "I see."

Remus eyes her right back. "How's Mary doing?"

A heavy sigh. "She's... alright. She's alright. Both of us are alright. In better sorts than we were a month ago, so that's something to be thankful for. Though it's worse sometimes."

"Is it?"

"Yeah." Marlene rubs her nose with the back of her hand.

"Yeah, sometimes. Y'know. I think when you finally get to a place where you can relax, all the... human stuff comes back. All that feeling and the blood and guts. It all spills out of you and you can't pick it all up."

"Yeah," Remus says, and thinks of post-moon days, when he's weepy and odd; how he almost cried when James went into Grimmauld Place last month and didn't come back out for half an hour.

"She cries a lot," Marlene says, as if she's read his mind.

"I'm sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry for." Marlene hesitates. "I haven't cried. At all, actually. Through this whole thing. I dunno why. I used to be a real crybaby. Remember? Hogwarts. '73. Lily threw me a birthday party and James remembered to get me a present and... and everybody else, too, but he never remembered that stuff, so it was nice. And I cried like a baby that whole day."

"I remember," Remus says, though it's a lie; it must've been a pre-moon day. His memory doesn't hold well at times like that. "It's okay if you've changed."

"I don't like who I am now."

"I'm sorry."

She shakes her head. They both sip their tea.

"I'm... angry. All the time. I yelled at her the other day. I never do that." Marlene takes another sip; she swallows

harshly. "But I just feel like a fucking nerve. Like every little thing sets me off. Like there's this... upper shelf and lower shelf, for how you feel, and they've squeezed right together, and I'm stuck in the middle, maxed out, and I can't go back down."

"We can try to find you somebody to talk to?" Remus offers tentatively.

Marlene waves him off. "Talking to a muggle about this stuff wouldn't help."

"We can try to find a magical person."

"Right now? I'll take my chances." Marlene looks over and meets his eyes. The steam has started to curl her dark hair at the temples. "How are you, Remus?"

"Surviving," Remus says, with more vigour than he thinks he really feels. "We all get by. It was just James and Lily and I before you both got here, back in Wales where we were staying last. Not much about us has changed. Just... what we do."

"Wales?"

"Where I'm from."

"Ah."

"We were based there when James infiltrated the Rosier Wedding."

"Oh. Wow." Marlene's eyes narrow. "I hadn't even known James was there."

"Yeah. That was when he broke Sirius out."

“That was him?”

“Yeah.”

“Why isn’t Black here now, then?”

Remus winces. Why indeed. “It’s complicated,” he says. “He’s... we don’t know exactly where he is right now. Or what he’s doing. But Voldemort wants him. So he’s on the run.”

Marlene leans across towards him. “Why?” she asks, something hungry in it.

“We don’t know for certain.” Remus hesitates. “We think... we think the two of them knew each other. For a while before Sirius disappeared. We don’t know how but from what we can get out of diaries we stole of his...” He trails off.

“You mean Black was working with you-know-who?” Marlene asks.

“We don’t think so. More like...” And Remus doesn’t quite know how to end that.

They’ve thrown theories around plenty. James thinks ‘Riddle’ wasn’t you-know-who at all, instead some mad member of Sirius’ family who was hurting him or blackmailing him or something to that effect. Lily and Remus are both firm in their belief that Riddle *is* Voldemort, but that’s where their theories split; Lily thinks Sirius started working under Riddle as a kid and got cold feet, where Remus thinks it can’t be that easy. It must have been something more complicated, something to do with his family, something to do with Walburga, for Sirius to have

been under Riddle's thumb for so long and not told them anything.

After all, bits of his diaries (*I can't stop having nightmares about that night, and Riddle's going to come back one of these days and do it again, and Tom's making a fifth one this summer and he touched my hair, now I want to cut it all off*) can't be simple. They can't be easily explained. There has to be something more going on than a cruel relative or a forced servitude. Remus is sure of it.

He's not sure how to tell James. Bless James, to the high heavens, honestly; he's amazing with people, and even then, he didn't see it. But Remus had seen it. And now he doesn't really know what to think anymore.

"We think," he says stallingly, even though it's only what he thinks and the others wouldn't agree, "we think, uh, he was... being sort of groomed. By Voldemort. For a while, probably."

"Oh," Marlene says.

"Yeah."

"I see."

"To be his... apprentice, sort of."

"Right."

"We don't know for sure. We don't know anything for sure. But we think he had some secret of his--" (*the fourth, a fifth, something Sirius knew that nobody else did*) "--something Voldemort is afraid of people knowing."

Marlene's face is unreadable for a while. "Then why hasn't he come back here?" she asks, then.

"I don't know."

"Fear?"

It's the most likely candidate. But saying it feels wrong. "Maybe," Remus admits. "I don't know."

"Well," Marlene sighs. "Some of us don't get the chance to run off to Europe, and... be looked for, and be his apprentice and get a chance to escape all this. Or whatever." And she stands up and shoves her mug at Remus.

"This isn't his fault--"

"Not saying it is." Marlene's face is readable then, all of a sudden. It's not anger, Remus realises. It's betrayal. "It would just be nice if people looked for us the way they're looking for him. The way they talk about him on *Direct Action*. You'd swear he was the only person missing."

"Marlene," Remus starts, but she's already crossed the kitchen and swept out of the room. She slams the door behind her and all the plates in the cupboards rattle against the wooden shelves.

Remus stares at the door for a bit, before sighing and pushing himself to his feet. If he was one of the others, he might go after her, but he's not, so he doesn't. Sirius is hardly here to get offended over that stuff anyway, and even if he was, he probably wouldn't be.

And truly, he thinks, washing their mugs out in the sink, he can't really blame her. The climate around Sirius has been

strange. *Direct Action* lords his name around like he's the chosen one and the Order's looking for him almost as intensely as they'd track down a death eater (and isn't that concerning). Half of the letters they receive mention him. He's become a sort of figurehead. Remus can't expect Marlene, traumatised and weary, and alone for months as she was, to take that and process it healthily.

He already knows he won't be mentioning this conversation to James, though. God forbid.

By the time it's mid-morning, Mary has risen, and she smiles shakily at Remus as she wanders into the kitchen, holding Marlene's hand tight.

"Toast?" Remus offers, studiously ignoring Marlene. Now's not the time for the resolution to that conversation.

"That would be great," Mary smiles. She sits at the table opposite James, who has already started sorting through their new mail, which spills off the table and onto the floor. "Did everybody sleep okay?"

"Just fine," James says, looking up and grinning like an idiot. "Though Remus tosses and turns."

"Shh," Remus says. "No I don't. And if I do, it's because I'm always scared Lily's going to fall off the top bunk and land on us."

"I would land on the floor," Lily says smartly. "So you would both be saved."

"I would catch you," James says chivalrously.

"You sleep like the dead," Lily corrects. "And so does Remus. I'd break my neck and you'd just keep snoring."

"I like to think we've all got a sixth sense for each other, after all this time," James opines modestly. "Like we know when we're in danger, y'know? Typography."

"Telepathy," Remus corrects absently, kissing the top of James' head as he passes Mary a plate of jam on toast. "Eugh. You need to wash your hair."

"We're out of shampoo."

Lily curses. "That's what I forgot on my last Tesco run."

"I'll get some after my shift this afternoon," Remus offers. He's got to be at Sainsbury's by two.

"I'll come walk you home," James says.

"You don't need to do that."

"I want to!"

"Of course you do," Remus sighs fondly. He takes his seat next to James again. "Give me some of those, I'll help."

James shoves a stack of letters at him, and a travel sneakoscope for good measure.

"You know those things don't work?" Marlene asks broodishly, pointing at the contraption.

"What? This?" James holds it up. "They work great! Never failed me yet."

"Maybe because nobody's tried to trick you," Marlene snaps back, rolling her eyes. "They're just tourist bullshit. They sell well to gullible people."

James frowns. Remus can imagine why; James has about a dozen of them. "My dad got half of these for me," he snaps.

"Then he was in the core demographic for cheap hoaxes."

"Marlene!" Lily says, faintly outraged.

James' face folds with hurt. He seems to want to lash out back, but Remus hooks his foot around James' under the table. Not today. They'll all be in better spirits tomorrow.

"Okay," James sighs eventually, shoulders deflating.

"Whatever. Lily, can you help me read this address? I've been on it for five minutes..."

Lily, looking quite proud, leans over to help James. They slip into an uncomfortable quiet again, but for Lily murmuring syllables as she tests out the address, seeing which street names sound the most probable. Some wizards really do have awful handwriting.

Remus manages to catch James in the hallway after lunch that day, before he leaves for his shift. "Hey," he says, grabbing his arm.

James looks up at him, forcing a smile. "Hey, Moony."

"Are you okay?"

"Just peachy."

Remus frowns. "You know she's only lashing out because she's frustrated," he murmurs in a very low voice. "She's been through a lot--"

"I know," James says, holding up a hand. He looks very tired then, like it's been years since he last took a break. "I know that."

Remus studies him. "Are you okay?" he asks again.

"I dunno," James says. "Yeah. Mostly." He slumps against the wall.

Remus slumps against it right beside him. "Tell me," he says.

"I guess... I guess I just thought things would get easier when we were actually helping," James confesses. "With Sirius, I mean. I thought I would spend less time worrying. But I just think about him more."

"Right," Remus murmurs.

"Especially since the girls got here, it's... it's like..." James hesitates. "I've known for a while that he won't be the same when we get him back. But it hadn't hit me that he'll be... worse, maybe. Not worse like, we wouldn't stay close to him. But worse like, sadder."

"You're sadder now," Remus says softly. "And I don't think you're worse."

"I guess," James says, staring pensively at the wall. "Yeah, I guess."

"I can call in sick?" Remus offers.

"Nah." James seems to shake himself. He pushes a smile onto his face and Remus hates the sight of it. "Nah, you should go. They'll get pissy with you if you miss."

“Right.”

“Right.”

They watch each other for a moment. *Kiss me?* James’ expression asks, and Remus obliges. In the quiet, *Golden Years* streams through the warbling radio in the kitchen. For that moment, it’s only them.

Remus pulls away when he feels he has to. “I should run,” he says.

“I’ll come get you,” James promises. “Eight?”

“Yeah. I might be a bit late. I have to fill out a contract and they won’t let me do it on my break.”

“One of these days, I’ll come down there and give them a piece of my mind.”

“And I’ll thank you for it,” Remus promises. “Good luck with the mail.”

“We’ll get through it,” James says. If anybody can, Remus knows, it’s James and Lily. “Now go!”

James and Remus,

Sorry it’s taken me so long to reply to you guys’ letter. It’s been weird here. Bad weird. I hope you’re both okay. I don’t know if I’m going to be allowed home for Christmas, since there are rumours they’re cancelling the holiday break, but if I am, don’t come over to see me, okay?

Love,

Peter

Friday comes quickly. It's the day before the full, and Remus aches with moonsickness, muscles very tense. James drags him and Lily off to the Friends' place that afternoon and they sit around their low table and talk until it gets dark, all of them, about everything from the war to the weather to muggle football leagues. Lily has strong opinions on the management for Arsenal FC. Remus is content to sit back and watch her talk, and evidently James is too.

"I'm just saying," Gambit finishes the debate with, "I get that you're passionate about this, but if they've been losing and slipping down the league tables for ten years now, and they haven't had a good year since '66, I doubt it's just about management. It might just be because they're a bad team--"

"And definitely not because they hired Bertie Mee as manager in '66," Lily says tersely. "I remember my dad's reaction! He threw away his Arsenal scarf!"

"Uh," Lyric says, and coughs. He's about as pureblood as James, and looks like he hasn't understood a word of the conversation for the past half hour. "Hate to break this up, I really do, but they'll be expecting us soon."

"Right," Lily says, quite flushed. "Sure. We should go."

"Sure," Gambit says herself. She shoots Lily a look that says, *this isn't over*. Equally contemptuous, Lily nods back.

Five minutes later, laden with coats, the six of them -- James, Remus, Lily, Gambit, Lyric and Jeremiah -- slip out of the Friends' base and into the blue twilight. It's a cold night, December drawing in, and Christmas lights twinkle from across the Thames, bright on the rippling water. Silvery mist fogs in front of all of their faces.

The Friends chat merrily amongst themselves. They've all graduated, and it makes them talk about the world in a slightly different way, Remus has noticed; like all the friends they've lost, they'll never get back. Like there isn't much of a normal to go back to. Still, they seem jolly enough most of the time, and that's all that matters, he supposes.

James sticks close to Remus' side, arm slung under his shoulders. On the days leading up to the moon, he seems to know Remus' limits better than he himself knows them, so Remus indulges it, and on his other side, Lily links her arm through his and hugs his elbow against her ribs.

"I'm alright," he tells them, when they both shuffle close on the way down a set of steps to the walkway beside the river. "Honest."

"We know," Lily says. "You just get tired on days like... well."

"Let us dote over you," James fills in. *You don't have a choice* is silent.

"Alright," Remus sighs, and hides a smile in the collar of his coat. It's nice to be taken care of sometimes.

"It's pretty out this time of year," Lily comments, watching the twinkling lights. "I'd never been to London before Hogwarts."

"I'd been a few times," James says. "Diagon and all that. Less in muggle London, though." He pulls his scarf tighter around his long neck.

"I'd never been either," Remus says whistfully.

"But you're... you grew up with wizard family?" Lily says.

“My dad was always paranoid somebody would recognise my... status, if he took me to wizarding London,” Remus winces. “And we were poor growing up, especially when it was just me and mum, so she never took me to see the muggle side of it. I hadn’t left Wales before when I came to London to get the Hogwarts Express.”

“Oh, wow,” James says mildly. “Crack in the road, watch your step.”

“I can walk on my own,” Remus laughs. Still, he avoids the crack.

Up ahead, one of them must make some joke because the Friends fall apart laughing, slapping each other’s backs. Lyric shoves Jeremiah and he goes staggering into the railing beside the water, snorting. Their mirth rings up the quiet street and into the night. It’s nice, Remus thinks, to imagine that friends can last that long.

“I’ve been thinking,” Lily says. “I want to ask McGonagall, when we see her, whether, uh. Well. I want to ask her about the charm I cast on the mailbox, actually. You know. The one in Gryffindor Tower.”

“Oh?” James asks.

Lily nods. When Remus glances at her, she looks drawn. “I would ask Flitwick, but... I think since she’s the head of Gryffindor and everything, and it’s about safety for Gryffindor students...”

“What are you thinking?” Remus asks.

“I’m thinking,” Lily sighs. “Okay. Vanishing cabinets -- real ones -- need to be made with magical materials. Usually wood imbued with chizpurfle fang. It’s so they can preserve

the contents in their original state. Teleportation is a tricky business, and ensuring that time doesn't get warped when you move through space has historically been... tough." She glances at their blank faces. "Like how the first known instance of magical time travel *forwards* was in a failed apparition."

"I didn't know that," James says interestedly.

"I read about it," Remus assents.

"Well, it's always been a point of concern. So when stuff like vanishing cabinets and enchanted objects got regulated by the Ministry in the '20s, making sure to properly preserve contents so they wouldn't get thrown around in time was a given."

"But ours is a postbox," James puts in.

"Right. So I was wondering what the preservation of ours would be like. If it could, y'know. Well. We know the time thing is okay. We haven't been getting letters from the future. But..." Lily trails off.

"What are you thinking?" Remus asks.

"I'm wondering," Lily replies, "if... if somebody was to put a living creature in a vanishing cabinet, it would stay alive. And I don't know if ours could do the same."

James and Remus exchange looks.

"Why?" James asks.

Lily chews her lip. "I want to talk to Amelie Bulstrode," she says.

Up ahead, Lyric turns to shout to them. "Stragglers! We're headed down into the metro!"

"Coming!" James calls. "Lils, we're talking more about this later..."

Lily nods. When Remus looks at her, she forces a smile. "I just think it'd help us get a little closer," she says. "Closer to lots of things. Mostly answers."

"Right," Remus says. He looks up at the near-full moon and his head throbs. Not for the first time, as Lily and James haul him down the steps into the underground, he wonders why the world hates him.

On the doorstep of 203 Hackney Terrace, Moody grills them all with excessive security questions. Remus leans against the doorframe with James under one arm and answers through a haze. He can hear his heartbeat loud in his ears and with each thump, his headache gets worse, the pain of it hot and fuzzy and weighing heavily on his sinuses. By the time they're all allowed in, the blueish sky has blackened like a burn. At least, Remus thinks as he staggers over the welcome mat, the meeting is out of the way of the moon.

They stumble to the living room then, which has been magically enlarged to fit more people. James deposits Remus in a chair. Chatter blooms around them all and every sound is too loud.

"You can put your head between your knees if you want," James murmurs in his ear, from one side of him. "You're pale, Moony."

"I'm fine," Remus says roughly. "Just need a minute."

"Water?" Lily asks, from the other side.

"I'm okay."

Neither seems to believe him. Remus glances up and the spinning room rights itself; nobody's looking at them. The whole space is piled with people, mostly strangers. It's about a third Order, and another third faces James vaguely recognises. Ex-students and the Friends and ministry workers. The man from behind the counter at Flourish and Blotts. Folks he had assumed dead. The other third are strangers.

"They're not watching?" Remus asks breathlessly.

"Nope," James says with orchestrated cheer. "Just us. Head down, easy does it."

Remus sits with his head between his knees for some time. The world fades out around him and he closes his eyes. Lily rubs his back and James speaks to him, but it blurs into a pleasant James-cadence background noise after a while, fuzzed out with nausea. It's been a while since the prelude to a moon has been this bad. The wolf has been unhappy since it lost Sirius, but it's especially so tonight. Perhaps it senses trouble.

Sirius, he writes in a letter in his head, because that's how he's been processing shit for a year and a half now and he's not about to stop. *Sirius, moons aren't the same as they used to be anymore. I think one of these days the wolf is going to bite its way out of me and run off.*

Somewhere to the front of the room, somebody calls out and everything goes quiet. With an effort, Remus sits upright, squinting over heads to the fireplace, in front of which stands Minerva McGonagall.

Immediately, he knows something has gone wrong.

The first time Remus spoke to Professor McGonagall, he was eleven and it was late evening, after the welcome feast. He hadn't spoken two words to any of his housemates yet, scared he would open his mouth and the wolf would lash out from between his teeth and steal his voice and they would all know what he was. Hogwarts was loud and golden, rich in the effortless way cathedrals aren't, and he knew, even then, that he didn't belong; back in Wales, none of them had anything, none of his friends or his family, and Hogwarts felt like a good dream from which he might suddenly wake up.

McGonagall pulled him aside after the feast and requested he come to her quarters before retiring to Gryffindor Tower. Sure he was going to be thrown out for some unknown faux pas, or maybe just for existing, Remus agreed, he remembers, and stumbled up after the feast let out, even though James asked him to come with them to the tower so they could all get to know each other.

"Am I being expelled?" he asked her, as soon as he was let into her office.

McGonagall stared at him from the other side of her desk. "Excuse me, Lupin?"

"I... I thought I was being kicked out, like."

"Ah." McGonagall glanced from him to her desk and back. "No, Lupin, unless you have been causing mischief so early in your time here...?"

"No," Remus said quickly. He remembers, even today, the sweeping relief of knowing he was safe to stay, at least for

another day or two. "No, I haven't been. Miss. Erm. Ma'am."

"Sit," McGonagall told him, not unkindly. "I'd like to clarify the accommodations made for you concerning your condition, Lupin. From what I understand, Professor Dumbledore has arranged for you to be transported to a safe location on the grounds for full moons?"

"Uh, yes," Remus said.

"And the days following?"

"I can go to classes," Remus says quickly. "I heal real fast. Honest."

McGonagall should've flinched at that, Remus knows now, should have faltered. But bless her, she didn't; she just plowed on and said, "No, Lupin, you'll be spending mornings following moons in the hospital wing. Rest assured, our medical staff will be happy to take you, and will do so with discretion concerning your condition." And she glanced up from her notes. "Will that be suitable?"

Remus couldn't imagine what it would be like to be healed after moons then. His mother had usually bandaged him up and left it there, knowing he would heal alone, too distraught to look at him for long. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah. Of course."

"The first moon of the term is next week?"

"Yeah."

"Right. Well," she sniffed. "I suppose we'll see how it goes. You are dismissed, Lupin, unless you have further questions?"

Remus slid out of his chair and started towards the door. For a moment, there, he paused, and then he turned back, he recalls, to face her again. She was still looking at him, like she'd expected it.

"What if I hurt someone?" he asked. "What if I attack a student?"

McGonagall stared. "Excuse me?"

"I'm not safe."

"If you were not safe, Lupin, you wouldn't be here." Her face did not soften. "Here, we protect and educate all young witches and wizards. Every one. You do not matter more or less than that. Do you understand?"

Remus blinked. "Yes," he said. "Yeah. Thanks."

She nodded at him. Remus can still picture the look on her face in that moment; like she had every single thing in the world under control, every variable. Each atom would have twisted and malformed to her whims. As much as she was a teacher, she was a conqueror, and for the first time in his eleven years of living, Remus wasn't scared of himself. To have a wolf like his at that age was to have a small child in him, one which cries and whines and throws fists, and for the first time, it had fallen silent.

The McGonagall standing before them all now has that very same look on her face. Like everything is under her imperious control. She also has a broad, mottled black bruise along the top of her forehead, and she's leaning very heavily on the back of a nearby chair, haggard and wrecked.

Murmurs fly through the room. James catches Remus' hand and holds it fast between them. Lily gasps faintly.

"Hogwarts has fallen," McGonagall says stiffly. She falls into the armchair. "Leighton Allencourt-Flint is taking his place as headmaster tomorrow, in the wake of my untimely passing to a rare liver disease."

Anger and grief are not entirely separate emotions. Both of them flood the room.

"Did someone attack you, professor?"

"What about Flitwick--"

"The students!"

Moody slams his cane on the ground. "Calm down, the lot of you!" he roars, and the crowd tempers, though only slightly. "Professor Flitwick, likewise, has been removed from his post."

McGonagall nods. She looks up and her gaze spears through the crowd, through each and every one of them. "They appear to have ascertained which of us have affiliations with the Order and acted accordingly. None of us were killed."

A witch across the room stands up, pale in the face and with a terrible fear in her eyes. "What about our children?!"

"Hogwarts," McGonagall says grimly, "is all but lost, now. Supposing students will even be allowed to return home for summer, should they not return to school in the autumn, they shall live with the Trace for the rest of their lives."

James springs out of his seat. "We can still get messages through, professor!"

Despite how sick she looks, despite her deathly palour, McGonagall cracks a very small smile at that. "With the owls in and out being watched, Potter, I think your operation is the only chance we've got."

Remus still feels nauseous, but a small part of him manages to burn with pride at that. The only chance they've got. Yes. Yes.

"After the meeting," McGonagall says, "you will hand out your mailing address to all of the parents gathered here, and answer any questions they have. Understood?"

"Yes, professor," James says eagerly. "We've already got a back-up plan for if this happened, we've got some seventh years we know can keep an eye on the teachers for us--"

Moody waves an impatient hand at him. "Later, boy. We haven't got the time for that."

Looking put-out, James sits back down. Remus grins at him. Lily is vibrating in her seat, expression hovering between anxiety and glee, and despite himself, James grins at the both of them. The glow of a new job to do always distracts from the maudlin.

"Parents," McGonagall continues, "will be briefed following the meeting on any information we have concerning the new... regime. For now, it's important that everybody is aware of what this means." Again, her stare sweeps the room. "Hogwarts is on its way to becoming what the ministry already is; a hub for the dark arts, a headquarters for death eater ideology. It is likely that students will face indoctrination into blood purist views, punishment for

failure to conform, and the ever-present threat of their magic being constricted should they not graduate satisfactorily."

"As for muggleborn students?" one of the parents calls out.

"We suspect they will be arrested from Hogsmede once the train has arrived," McGonagall says. "Since that was the plan this year, before a well-timed raid on the Hogwarts Express."

Lyric springs out of his seat. "You mentioned punishment," he says. "What punishment?"

"So far?" McGonagall's grey face seems to get greyer. "Blood quills, cutting hexes, jinxes. On occasion, the cruciatus."

Uproar spreads through the room like fire. "Fuck," Remus says.

James' hand gets so tight around his arm that it hurts. Lily leans forward to place her hands over her face. Remus doesn't have to look at his fellow marauder to know they're both thinking the same thing; Peter.

Suppose they'll have to figure out the mailbox thing, Remus thinks absently. They've no other choice. Not when one of their own is threatened.

Moody slams his cane down against the ground again, harder now. "Attention!" he roars over the crowd. "As exciting as this development is, it's not why we're here. So listen up." He stares out over all of them, glowering. "We've a smaller meeting room upstairs. Every of-age Order member -- yes, those of other groups can come to, so long as you've been vetted -- is required up there. Now."

Immediately, half of the room moves towards the door, leaving the parents and a handful of ministry personnel in the larger room. Remus, Lily and James exchange looks.

"Professor!" James calls, standing up and pushing through the room to McGonagall's side. "Professor, I know we're not of-age, but we should be in there--"

The glare McGonagall pins him with is tremendous. "Potter," she snaps. "If you recall, we made a deal--"

"I know that," James cries desperately. "But even if we don't fight, we can help!"

"No," she says. "And my answer is final."

Remus has, by this point, managed to shuffle over, one arm slung over Lily. "Professor," he pleads. "Even if we don't fight, we can help. There's stuff we can do... we at least want to know..."

McGonagall stares between them all. "I don't think you all understand," she snarls. "This is a war."

"We've told you, we know!" Lily butts in. She's scowling now, a look Remus hasn't really seen on her face before. "We know it's a war, professor, we've been fighting in it for months. And we're your only way of communicating with the students now. Do you really want to push us out of this?"

"Miss Evans, I will not be blackmailed--"

"Then let us in!"

"We promised not to fight," James says. "We never promised not to help."

McGonagall sighs. "Go, then," she says stiffly. "If you're so eager to throw your lives away."

James grabs Remus and pulls him towards the door. Remus allows himself to be tugged up the stairs, and they shuffle with the crowd into the upstairs meeting room, which has limited chairs; they all end up leaning against a wall.

"Thought you lot wouldn't be allowed?" Gambit asks them, from nearby.

"Nah," James says. "We convinced McGonagall. She can't say no to this face."

Remus rolls his eyes. "If anybody's face did it," he says, "it was mine."

From the front of the room, Moody raises his hands for attention, signature scowl still tight across his gnarled face. He holds himself like a very old, very powerful tree as he stalks into the centre, glaring around at them all.

"Potter," he starts.

"McGonagall said we could be here!" James protests immediately.

They glare at one another for a few seconds. Remus makes a valiant effort to sink into the wallpaper.

"Fine," Moody grunts. He swings around to face the other side of the room, mostly Order members. "This is the long and short of it; in a fortnight, a group of select Order members are carrying out a raid on Rosie Manor, Hampshire. This is because thanks to a tip, we know various Order members and fugitives are being held there."

James goes very, very still beside Remus.

“We need strength in numbers for an operation like this,” Caradoc Dearborn stands up to say. “Any able-bodied witch or wizard who is of-age and able to fight, we implore you to volunteer your services to this mission.”

“We’ll also need a set of safe, separate locations to serve as safehouses after the fact,” Moody says, stalking in circles through their midst. “These will be portkeyed to after the mission is complete. Ideally in the London area...”

Remus rests his head against the wall as the details of the plan are laid out before them all. James has frozen up beside him, staring intently at the floor. When he has the strength, Remus reaches out to take his hand, holding it between them.

“You okay?” he whispers.

James nods, not looking like he heard him. “Yeah,” he whispers. “I’m okay.”

On Remus’ other side, Lily has a very odd look on her face. Like she’s thinking about something very hard.

“You okay?” Remus asks her, too, feeling a little like the only thread holding the two of them down to this planet.

“What?” Lily glances up at him. “Yes. Yes, I...” She trails off, then leans in close. “I have another idea.”

“For how to get us into that fight?”

She shakes her head. “For how to prove ourselves,” she says.

Sirius,

Lord help us. Every day we wake up and make stupid decisions. And I don't even complain about it.

Anyway, it's the full this evening, so once Lily and James are done planning our demise in the kitchen, we're taking the train down to the southeast coast. I ache all over already. Last night is a blur, but I remember one thing clearly: Lily has plans, and we'll go along with them, because that's what we do, isn't it?

Wish me luck. Stay safe out there!

Remus.

Remus remembers little of the full, which is unusual. Usually, he remembers quite a bit of it when James is there.

After the transformation back, the hazy staggering to the edge of the field, James shucks him into a coat and they lie together on a grassy null overlooking the ocean, both of them still not fully dressed, shivering against the morning cold.

"We'll have to crowd them all into the kitchen," James is saying. "We could probably get a few extra chairs second hand from that, uh, Cancer Research charity shop down the road, right? I dunno how many it'll be. We'll need medical supplies, too."

"Mmm," Remus says, mushing his chin into James' shoulder.

"Oh, fuck!" James exclaims. "Lily spoke to Fenwick about enchanting the gun, right? If she's done it, she can take it

with her to Diagon Alley!”

“Mmmm.”

“I mean, it would be better than nothing, right? And then once she’s out of there, we can get right to the brewing...”

“Mmm,” Remus agrees.

“Sorry.” James settles a little. “Just... got a lot on my mind.”

“‘s okay.”

“You’re not aching too much?”

“Nah,” Remus says, full to the brim with love and other stuff. “Nah, I’m okay.”

“Okay.”

“Love you.”

“Love you.”

Sirius,

I tried to write to the Friends to get some help for our next great endeavour, which is only three days out now, since they wanted to get it done before the start of next week, but James stopped me. He reckons we should do it all on our own and not get anybody else involved so they know we’re capable (the cheek of him, it’s murder) and worst thing? I’ve got a shift at Sainsbury’s on the afternoon they want to do it, so I won’t even be there.

I explained the plan to you in my last letter. You agree that it’s stupid, right? James says it’ll be in and out, and nobody

will even give Lily a second glance, not with the cloak on her. He's gonna wait outside the Leaky Cauldron in muggle clothing and keep his head down. Lily thinks that it'll be fine, and I trust her a whole lot more with this stuff than James, bless him, but... it still seems improbable to me. Where are you when we need you? You would've sided with James, (on absolutely anything; I'm certain of that), but maybe you could bring a handful of slightly safer ideas to the table with that big brain of yours.

Lily seems to know I'm worried. She's asleep above me right now, and James is in the kitchen working late. She pulled me aside before dinner (more soup and toast. It's all we eat) and told me please not to worry about her, she doesn't want that, and she's sure she'll be just fine. She said she feels like she has to risk something, since both of us have lost stuff. I told her that's not how this works and I don't think she listened to me.

Anyway. Pray for us. And stay safe! Sorry my letters have been a little shorter. Call it moonsickness.

Remus.

The moment Remus finishes his shift on Saturday night, he shucks a canvas jacket over his Sainsbury's uniform and runs all the way home, flying through the streets of Lambeth, black trainers thumping the ground as he jogs in sight of the river. It's dark already, the sky faintly blue and faintly grey in mottled patches, black mostly. For once, he doesn't even bother to peer over his shoulder in paranoia. Let them follow him, for all he cares. He's got more important things to worry about.

Remus makes it into the apartment building and up the stairs, then fumbles the key into the lock, hands jittering. *Come on. Come on.* By the time he gets the key inside, the wolf in him is snarling, hackles raised.

He throws the door open. Inside, James and Lily are sitting at the kitchen table.

"Oh, thank Merlin," Remus says. He slams the door closed behind him.

James grins at him. He's leaning across to tend to a cut on Lily's brow bone, dabbing it with antiseptic. "Hope we didn't worry you."

"You said you'd come get me," Remus accuses. "I thought... I thought..."

"It took a bit longer than we thought it would, we only just got back," Lily says, looking up at him with a soft, challenging smile. She's got a bruise on her chin. "But we did it."

"You got caught?"

James laughs. "Nope."

"But-- your face--"

"I walked into a wall," Lily says stiffly. "It really is hard to measure distance under the cloak, James."

Remus stares at her for what must be five or ten seconds, just taking her in. Then, he plops down into the chair between them and grabs both James and Lily into a tight hug, sandwiching himself between them, an arm around each of their necks.

"I was scared," he admits into the space between them.

"We're just fine," James promises, squeezing. "Nobody saw."

"And you got everything?"

Lily nods. She kicks something under the table; Remus leans down and sees a black duffel bag full of glass bottles and pots.

"It's so... different in there," she says, frowning now as she pulls away. "No people. Wanted posters everywhere, especially his. Your face is up there too, James. Not either of us."

"Ah," James says, and grins. "My work is appreciated."

Remus shoves him. "It means we'll have to be more careful," he says. "Just Lily and I should do delivery runs from now on, unless it's-- don't look at me like that, Prongs. I meant to say, unless it's with the cloak."

James shrugs a little brutishly. "Sure," he says.

"When are you going to start brewing?" Remus asks.

"Tonight," Lily says eagerly, a familiar glint in her eye. This is what she's best at, he reminds himself. Bold moves and games of chance. Her coming to stay with them at all, starting all this, was one big game of chance. They have yet to see if it'll pay off.

"Feels like Padfoot's Army all over again," James sighs. "Like it was in school, I mean."

"Yeah," Lily agrees. "Next thing we know, Remus, James is going to jump on the table and request that we bask in his brilliance."

"I wasn't that bad," James snorts, unaffected.

"Of course you weren't," Remus tells him, bursting with fondness and not meaning it at all.

"Ha," Lily says, and leaves it at that, grinning at the table.

Something occurs to Remus. "Lils, I forgot to ask before you left... did you end up taking the gun?"

Lily stares. Then, she bursts out laughing. "Of course not!"

"Thank Merlin. That would've ended in disaster."

"Hey!" James proclaims, "I thought it was a good idea!"

"You think lots of things are good ideas," Remus reasons.
"You're rarely right."

"One of these days, the both of you will see the error of your ways and learn to trust me," James says. "It'll be like the... the guy who cried wolf."

"The boy who cried wolf, James," Lily corrects, in peals of laughter. "Boy. Not guy."

"Oh."

Remus huffs a laugh. "Are the girls asleep?"

"I think so," Lily says, sobering a little. "They were when I last looked in on them. Do you think they'll be alright next week? Y'know."

“We can shut them in the second bedroom,” James offers.

“James!”

“I mean to make sure nobody bothers them!” he corrects hastily. “You always assume the worst of me, Lily.”

“Can you blame me?” Lily asks, amused.

He shrugs. “Suppose not. Remus loves me, though, don’t you, Moony?”

“Of course I do,” Remus agrees, taking the antiseptic wipe off James to finish the job himself.

Chums of the Firebird,

On our way over tonight with fair tidings! We’ve got letters for you lot and a little extra. Tell the terminator not to kill us on the doorstep. He almost took Lykos’ head off last time. We’re owling this to you, so if it arrives opened, well, suppose that proves muggle mail is more reliable, doesn’t it?

Cheers,

The Supreme Commission of Dog People

Reluctantly, James stays in the flat when Remus and Lily go to Order HQ the following Monday. He complains about it for half an hour before seeming to realise he isn’t getting anywhere and giving up. Remus is thankful he doesn’t push it. They try not to express an excess of worry for each other where they can help it, but the idea that James’ wanted poster is slathered all over wizarding London isn’t exactly a

pleasant one, and Remus has nightmares about James dying often enough without unnecessary risks.

It's a crisp evening, still light by the time they head out, one of those odd, clear days when the evening lasts longer than it should. Mid-December in London is bustling and bright, everything in shades of red and gold. Lily and Remus both stock backpacks full of everything they can carry and then set off down the road to the metro, arm in arm.

"He frets more than he lets on," Lily says, crunching on a patch of ice. "Even more than you some days."

"I know." Remus stares out over the river. "He used to be so funny on the days after fulls. Before he and Sirius and Peter finished..." And he trails off. "Well. I would come back torn up and tired, and he would write all my essays for me and cover for me if I had to miss classes, even if I hadn't wanted to miss them. Sirius thought it was all very funny. Guess the idea of me being hurt freaked him out less."

"I see."

"Not because he cared less," Remus clarifies. He shrugs and the bottles in his backpack clink like windchimes. "I think he was just used to being hurt himself. You know?"

"I guess," Lily agrees contemplatively. "Have they always been bad, then?"

"Moons?" Remus nods. "They were awful when I was a kid, especially. At Hogwarts, I had the whole run of a big house. Back home, they kept me in a cage."

"That's awful!"

Remus shrugs. "I was just a cub. But I was still a danger."

Lily shakes her head fervently. "You're not a danger to anyone, Remus."

Remus thinks of how Sirius laughed that night they all saw Remus' scars the first time. James had said *it's barbaric, Remus, you can't... there must be some other way, it butchers you!* and Sirius, twelve, had laughed and mocked, *'it's barbaric, Remus'* like there was nothing odd about barbarism.

"I don't know," he sighs. "I wonder."

At Order HQ, nighttime veils its way across the sky and Fenwick grills them both for five minutes on the doorstep before reluctantly allowing them inside.

"Sorry for the excess of security," he tells them, shutting the door behind them and locking it four times. "We got your letter, but we can't be too careful. One of them showed up the other day, polyjuiced like Arthur Weasley."

"Oh, that's awful," Lily murmurs. "Did they hurt anyone?"

"Moody killed them on the front step," Fenwick says dryly. "So be careful not to get security questions wrong, I suppose, aye? Come through, then, after me. There's not many people here, but if you wait around a tick, Minerva's meant to come through sometime this evening."

Remus and Lily are shuffled into chairs in the main room, near the fire. Aside from them and Fenwick, there's a witch sitting in the corner, napping on a long sofa, with a long, red gouge along the top of her face, starting at her hairline and cutting down through her right eye in a harsh, horizontal slash.

“There’s a hippogriff and a handful of centaurs sleeping upstairs,” Fenwick warns them both. “So don’t be too loud. I’ll be in the study if you need anything.”

“Thanks,” Remus says earnestly.

When he’s gone, they turn to look at one another.

“Who...?” Lily murmurs, pointing to the wounded woman.

“No idea,” Remus admits. He gets the impression they take in lots of war-weary survivors here, just like how they wanted to move James, Lily and him in when they first came.

Lily sighs. “Suppose we’re lucky not to be doing much fighting,” she murmurs, and leans against the side of her chair. Their backpacks sit on the floor between them.

“Suppose we are,” Remus agrees.

He pulls out his wand and casts a few lumos charms, sending tiny balls of golden light fluttering through the room towards the ceiling. The familiar glow of magic floods him. This is what life’s about. He hopes, absently, that Sirius is in someplace where he’s able to do magic, too. He would miss it more than any of them.

Lily laughs as one of the little light balls flies towards her, brushing the tip of her nose and making her go cross-eyed. She reaches out to snare it between her fingers, holding it like a book between tilted palms. It underlights her face, making the stringy ends of her short hair glow like she’s aflame.

“I miss Hogwarts,” she murmurs. “Sometimes I forget it’s going to be like this for a long time.”

Before Remus can answer, the fire before them flares up green. McGonagall steps serenely through. She looks significantly healthier than last week, but just as worn down.

"Ah," she says, when she sees Remus and Lily. "Where's Potter, then?"

"Couldn't make it," Remus replies. "We're busy, really busy."

McGonagall nods. Her face loosens somewhat. It occurs to Remus that she's rather afraid one of them is going to stop showing up to meetings and it'll be because they're dead.

"What's this all about, then?" she prompts. "I don't have all day, Lupin."

Lily stands from her seat. "We had an idea," she says.

"Oh, god forbid," McGonagall says flatly.

Lily presses on. "At the meeting the week before last," she says, "when Auror Moody was talking about the raid on Rosier that's happening this week, he mentioned that magic will have to be used, but only once they're all inside, since by then, they will have been discovered anyway; setting off the Trace won't cause any additional harm. But it leaves them all in a vulnerable position, to try to make their way through the wards around the manor and past the guards without using magic--"

"And we're worried the Trace might call additional attention to them," Remus agrees, "if they use more magic than they have to. They'd be calling in the death eater's reinforcements for them."

“So we thought we’d figure out something else,” Lily says, and bends down to heft one of the heavy backpacks into her vacant armchair. “We’ve been brewing for the past few days-- they’re not perfect, but... well. It’s enough to help, we hope, anyway.” And she opens the bag for McGonagall to see.

McGonagall strides over, robes whipping. She plucks one of their vials out and turns it over in her hand.

“Forgive me,” she says. “Potions are not a strong suit of mine.”

“That one’s for smoke,” Lily says quickly. “If you uncap it, it’s... it’s sealed like a muggle aerosol. We used an old deodorant can to do it. There’s tons of pressure on it, so when you cut the melted plastic, just there, and uncork it, it expels a bunch of smoke. Quick getaway.”

“Smoke can be dispelled with a spell, Miss Evans,” McGonagall says, though she doesn’t sound dissenting.

“We know,” Remus puts in. “We added crushed occamy eggshell. Makes it stick around.”

Lily pulls out another bottle. “We’ve got twenty smoke vials,” she says. “And these ones, the orange caps, they explode on impact, so if you throw them at a door, they should get you through... we added bundimun secretion, which should help it break through doors which are enchanted shut, too, since it breaks down spell matter when heated. It’s not foolproof, and we haven’t had a chance to try the combination out, but it’s something.”

McGonagall stares between them both. She opens her mouth, then closes it. “What else?” she asks eventually.

“These ones catch fire,” Remus points out, pulling out a pod of clear liquid. It’s a converted muggle laundry pod, but McGonagall doesn’t need to know that. “We injected them with crushed erumpent tail, which should react with the alcoholethoxy sulfate if broken, so chuck them hard enough at wall, or split them with a cutting jinx, and you’re good to go.”

“That one was Remus’ idea,” Lily assents. She pulls out another bottle. “And we also whipped up a few contact healing drafts. Only, uh, a dozen, and they’re in small doses, but it could help. They’re not safe to drink, and they’re not long-term help, but they should be able to graft surface wounds together. We made them out of dittany and vodka and petroleum jelly. It’ll burn a bit, but it’s enough to keep you from bleeding out.”

McGonagall stares. For a moment, Remus thinks she’s going to yell at them and tell them to get back to Gryffindor Tower or something, since it’s past curfew.

After some time, she says, “Where did you get the ingredients?”

“I did,” Lily owns up immediately. “James has an invisibility cloak. I borrowed it and went into Diagon Alley.”

McGonagall turns on her. “Evans, if you’d been caught, they would have killed you on the spot!”

“I wasn’t, though, was I?” Lily says. The cut on her forehead looks very dark against her, then, as the blood drains from her face. “They didn’t get me. And they’d kill me on the spot anyway. So I don’t see why I shouldn’t have control of that-
-”

“Evans, you can’t go wandering into Diagon Alley alone in this climate, no matter how many potions you have dreamed up in that no-doubt brilliant mind of yours,” McGonagall snaps, so loud that Remus thinks the sleeping woman will wake up, but she doesn’t. “I forbid this... this is...”

“You can’t stop us!” Lily retorts. “You told us not to fight, so we did. But you can’t keep us out of this, not when we’re so deep in it. We’ve set up a whole communications system, better than anything you’ve got. We’ve taken in fugitives, we’ve supplied information to different factions, we’ve infiltrated the ministry, we’ve rescued a prisoner. We’ve proven ourselves capable ten times over, professor. That’s all there is to it.”

McGonagall puffs up like a viper ready to strike. She jabs a bony finger at Lily. “I can and will cut you all off from the Order,” she says.

“And we’ll survive fine on our own,” Lily snaps back. “And you’ll have to do without our potions, and our information, and our flat for a safehouse. Good luck!” And for emphasis, she throws her hands in the air, as if to say, *begone!*

“Professor,” Remus puts in, a little calmer. “We know you’re worried.”

“You’re children,” McGonagall half-shouts. She rubs her tired face.

“We know we are.” Remus picks up one of the healing drafts and tosses it from hand to hand. “But we’re not the ones who brought children into this war. They did, when they kidnapped Sirius Black.”

“We didn’t start this,” Lily agrees. “We just want to finish it.”

McGonagall glares at them both, hard. “The next time you wish to do something so reckless,” she says after a moment, “you shall tell us in advance. You’re not doing this alone.”

“Of course,” they both agree, even though they both know it’s a bare-faced lie.

Sirius,

Oh my god, I can’t believe we just did that (!!)

If they don’t manage to pull off this raid with flying colours, Lily’s going to break right back into Diagon Alley and do it all again, I know her, ten times more potions and all of them deadlier than the last batch we made. She’s glowing right now. On the other side of the table. And James is doting. And I can’t stop smiling. He kissed me like he didn’t have a choice when we came in and he keeps doing it. Even Marlene and Mary seem in high spirits! And that’s saying a lot!

One thing at a time, though. We keep having to remind ourselves of it. Just one day at a time.

Phew! Stay safe! I love you!

(Very happy) Remus.

Chapter End Notes

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FUCK OFF, REMUS

Chapter Notes

hello lovelies!

twos: brief discussion of suicidality, trauma, mental illness, injury, discussion of violence, dark themes

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Pads,

Today's the day! Well. Tonight's the night, I suppose. I'm still in bed. I can hear Remus talking to Marlene in the kitchen. Probably about feelings and trauma and stuff. He's good at this. Between you and I, I'm shit at the hosting thing. I never know what to say to either of them, and I just end up stumbling around them awkwardly and offering to make tea. Marlene and I have argued three times this week and it's only Friday. Lily's a bit upset with me because of that.

I know in my head we're all stressed because of the war. We've all got the right to be! And I don't blame them, either of them, for anything. Y'know. I'm not going to yell at them for saying the wrong thing after all they've been through. I can complain to you about it, though; you take my side with everything.

Anyway. I don't know. I feel selfish now. It's been an okay week. We're keeping on top of things. It's almost Christmas Eve and we've been bogged down with student mail to worried families, which has doubled over the past ten days or so. It's a lot of work (and a lot of stamps; Lily thinks we should try and set ourselves up as a business so we don't

have to pay tax on them, whatever that means), but we're getting through it all. Remus is taking longer shifts at Sainsbury's to fund our Christmas spending and because we're taking over half the rent payments in the new year, Lily spends lots of time talking to the girls about nothing in particular, and I spend every waking hour reading letters.

Some of the tips are useful. Some less so. Last week, a letter we took for the Order got a wounded vampire in Kent rescued and taken to a safehouse in Surrey! So that's good! Remus was very pleased. And a few days ago, a tip-off from an anonymous person with a return address in Newcastle helped the Friends reconnect a runaway muggleborn student (ex-student, I guess) with her parents. Lily looked very strange when we got news about that. I didn't ask. I think hearing about muggleborns makes her very upset. She worries for her family a lot.

Anyway, point is: we're all okay. Not great (it'll be Remus and I's second Christmas without you. A year ago, we kissed for the first time. Weird how time flies like that, right?) but alright. And once we've gotten the raid out of the way, we're gonna figure out the next thing. Lily wants to get into Hogwarts to talk to Amelie Bulstrode.

The fourth. The fourth. I think about it all the time.

How much didn't we know about you? How much might I not know about the others?

I dunno. I say this a lot, but it bears repeating that I don't blame you. Not at all. I love you.

Yours,

Prongs.

"It shouldn't be for too long," Lily promises, chewing on her lip. "We'll try to get them out of here as soon as possible. Are you sure you're both going to be okay?"

Marlene, hovering in the doorway of the second bedroom with her hair all a mess, nods. She looks more tired than afraid. It's been a day since James last spoke directly to her. The both of them do well at ignoring each other.

"We'll be alright," she says, lowering her voice. "Mary's a little anxious, but as long as we stay in here and they stay out there... we'll be okay."

"Right," Lily sighs. "I'm sorry again about this."

"Don't be. We know it's necessary."

Leaning up against the wall down the hallway, James picks a piece of loose skin off the edge of his thumb and it stings more than it reasonably should. Every nerve in him has been on edge since the summer of 1975, and they're not about to stop now.

Lily gives Marlene a quick hug. James watches Marlene stiffen and not hug back.

"See you in a few hours," Lily promises.

"Yeah," Marlene says. "Bye." And she closes the door.

"C'mon," James murmurs, taking Lily's arm. They cross back into the kitchen together, where Remus is sitting at the table, compulsively sorting through their healing supplies for the fourth time this afternoon.

The sun is setting over London out of the window. They're all a little sick with a cold which one of them brought into

the apartment earlier in the week, and which they have all subsequently caught.

"Did you get Soothers?" James asks, plopping down next to Remus and proceeding to put his feet in his lap.

Remus nods, fishing in his pocket and pulling out one of those purple plastic tubes of cough sweets. "Blackcurrent," he says.

"Thanks," James replies, taking two.

"That's medicine, you know, not sweets."

James wrinkles up his nose. "Yeah. Sure."

Lily takes one, too. "We're out of lemons. For tea."

"I'll get more tomorrow," James offers. "Think I'm gonna head down to the ministry to drop off that letter for Cordelia Dearborn early."

"With the cloak," Remus reprimands mildly.

"With the cloak," James promises.

They all chew on their cough sweets for a while. Orange sunlight slips down the wall and then fades into an off-colour glow, warm and turning colder.

"I think they'll both be okay," Lily says, mostly to herself. "Mary came to me the other day asking how to get rid of nightmares. What are you supposed to say to that? We haven't even gotten them to talk about..." She trails off.

"It's not your responsibility to heal them," James says, in a voice he hopes is gentle and not selfish. "You don't have to do that."

"Yes, but we're all in the business of doing things that aren't our job."

"Which is why it isn't your obligation to take on another thing."

"They're my friends."

"You can't fix them on your own!"

"James," Lily sighs, with a note of challenge in her voice.

Remus cuts between them. None of them have the energy to afford an argument and he seems to know it. "James and I will try to reach out to them more," he promises. "Try not to blame yourself for their... struggling. Okay?"

Lily sighs. "It's hard not to. We shared a dorm for years. You haven't seen them like... I don't know."

"They'll be okay."

"I'm struggling to believe anybody's going to come out of this okay."

Remus takes her hand and squeezes until his knuckles go white. James decides it's in his best interests not to say anything. Sometimes, he still manages to feel like a kid, even after all this time. Like Sirius is going to wander through the door with some grand new plan on how to humiliate Mulciber at breakfast tomorrow.

"Sorry, James," Lily sighs. "I guess you're right, somewhat. A bit."

"Nah. I'm sorry, too." James glances out of the window.
"You're right, too. Somewhat. A bit."

"We're all sorry," Remus sighs. "I'm sorry, too, and I didn't do anything."

Despite himself, James laughs at that. "You're always sorry for everything," he retorts. He's never been able to apologise for things like Remus can. It's a skill.

"And nobody's stopped me yet," Remus says, amused. He lets go of Lily's hand to start sorting their supplies again, in and out of little piles.

The raid is supposed to begin in a few hours. Lily's been riding a high all week, burning her way around the flat like she's on a caffeine high. Evidently, the meeting with McGonagall went well. Remus told James about it, in the long and short, and James burned with pride and envy in equal measure. As much as he would've liked to be there, Remus has been tetchy about safety. He's been tetchy about everything. They've all sort of been.

As a rule, they try not to fight. It's been a conscious effort and they're pretty good at it, all things considered. For the most part, they obey themselves on it. It's just been a little harder.

Then again, James thinks: everything is hard. This is no different. And if he doesn't hold the three of them together, he fears he'll come apart, and that's not something he can afford to do until he's gotten Sirius Black back into his life.

It always comes back to *him* , somehow. Remus would laugh if James told him and say he wasn't surprised. The whole affair of it is a touch too esoteric. James would talk to a therapist rather than writing Sirius copious letters venting if only he thought they might come close to understanding it.

"I'm going to take a shower," Lily says decisively. She stands up. "Remus, you're going to drive yourself insane with those."

Remus shrugs, dropping a bottle of dittany like it's burnt him. "Sorry."

She rolls her eyes and wanders out into the hallway. James kicks the chair leg across from him. Remus picks up the dittany again.

Evening creeps into night. They turn all the lights on in the kitchen and it gives James a headache. Lily paces in the hallway and Remus washes all of their dirty dishes by hand, drying them all individually, and doesn't ask for help.

Nobody would tell James who's being rescued when he asked at the last Order meeting he attended. He knows three, off the top of his head, who he would give anything to talk to again. It's a sort of survivor's guilt, he psychoanalyses, that makes him so eager to see the same faces he saw at the Rosier Manor again. To make sure that they lived. To this day, he doesn't quite remember how he himself made it out. Remembering any of it makes James break out in a cold sweat.

Eight passes, then nine. Soon, Lily runs out of steam and Remus runs out of plates, and the three of them sit at the kitchen table together in silence.

"You know," Lily says into the quiet, as the clock on the wall ticks past ten. "I want to check on my family sometime."

"Yeah?" James asks.

"Yeah."

"We can do that."

Lily nods. She fiddles with her fingers in her lap, obviously struggling for words. "Train's expensive," she says eventually. "Up to the midlands from here."

"We can afford it," Remus soothes.

"Yeah, but." She shrugs parsimoniously. "Still."

"You reckon they're okay?" James asks, perhaps unkind.

"I hope they are." Lily glances out of the window like she's trying to find a way out. "I mean. It's been a long time. Hearing on *Direct Action* what they do to muggleborns and their families... and of course, I didn't leave any trace. I've told them to be careful. Gave them the right safety measures. And I looked it up, and Hogwarts doesn't keep those records. Of our homes, I mean."

"Right," Remus says.

"So they would have no way to track them. But I still worry."

"I thought you didn't get on with your sister?" James offers.

"Yes," Lily sighs. "But I still care about her. You don't just stop loving your sibling if they're mean to you. That's not how family works."

James is an only child through and through, never had friends until Hogwarts, until Sirius. Sirius isn't a sibling to him, though, so he supposs he doesn't still get it. "Right," he says anyway. "Yeah. Sorry."

"It's okay."

Remus, another only child, looks a little out of his depth too. "We'll go with you," he promises. "If you take the train up to visit them."

"Thanks," Lily sighs. She rests her head on James' shoulder. "I wonder about Regulus."

"Yeah?"

"I never spoke to him," she continues. "Not really. He looked so much like Sirius, and I hated Sirius, so I guess I hated him too."

"He was a nasty little bugger," James puts in. "Mean. Sirius loved him, though. Hated him, too."

"Funny how siblings do that."

"I've been thinking about Regulus too," Remus offers. "But we've got enough on our plate without trying to rescue the kid."

"Of course."

"I'm sure he's alright."

James and Lily murmur their assent. The smell of guilt permeates the white-tea-and-laundry-detergent air.

A glance at the clock confirms it's almost quarter-past ten, now. London is still, not billowing with wind like Lambeth usually is at this time of night. Red and gold lights glimmer in a window across the street. James watches a couple dance in their kitchen on the bottom floor apartment across the river from theirs.

There's a sharp, suction sort of noise, like air being squeezed out of a vacuum.

"Fuck!" somebody shouts in the hallway.

James, Lily and Remus all burst to their feet, slipping on the tiles, squeezing past one another out of the kitchen door. Over Remus' shoulder, James sees three men collapsed in the entryway, clutching a black bicycle tyre. There's blood on the floor. They're all sprawled in a heap of dark robes and they reek of awful magic.

"Shit," Remus says in front of him, and it's as though they had never lived in the shadow of any tension to begin with as they all burst into action.

Remus and James both swarm forwards, helping the men to their feet. Faces blur and feet slide on the wooden floor, scrabbling for purchase. Lily runs back into the kitchen and hurtles through their supplies, retrieving a pre-charmed diagnoses quill and pointing it at their injured guests like a gun. It begins scribbling notes across her pale arm.

"One of them's got a poisoned wound," she instructs. "And this one has a broken leg. James, get them into chairs in the kitchen. Remus, dittany. Dittany."

"Got it!" Remus shouts, depositing his load on the chair at the head of the table. He grabs and uncorks a bottle.

"Face wound," Lily instructs. "This one." And she points to James' passenger, a pale-eyed white man with grey hair, who has a gouge through his left eye. "It's just from a cutting curse. Dittany, now."

James dumps the man into a chair so Remus can start working on him and runs back out into the hallway. The

remaining man is tall and black, crumpled in a heap.

"Hey," James says, finding what he thinks must be his shoulder under the folds of a thick cloak. "Hey, can you roll over for me? I need to get you into the kitchen."

With a sharp groan that is almost a shout, the man grapples his way over onto his back. And James stares.

"Shacklebolt," he murmurs. "Oh, fuck. Hi."

Shacklebolt squints up at him. "Who are you?"

"Uh," James says. "I'll explain later. Come on, let's get you into the kitchen."

He hauls Shacklebolt to his feet, worming an arm around his back. The man is rail thin and bony under his robes, and his face has a hollow, wild sort of look to it that it didn't when James saw him at the wedding. They stagger into the kitchen together and James drops him into a chair opposite the white-haired man from before.

"He's not in any danger," Lily says. "Malnourished, not injured. Nutrition potion, James."

"We've only got one--" Remus protests.

Lily's eyes flash. "I don't want him passing out. Potion."

James nods. He pushes himself into the chair beside Shacklebolt and it screeches against the floor. The nutrition potion is brilliant, dark blue. He presses it on the man. "Here."

Shacklebolt stares at him. Under the yellowish light of the kitchen, he looks so confused that James feels very sorry for

him. It's probably all been a bit of a blur. Especially since it's been... christ.

"Six months," James murmurs. "It's been six months. It's December now."

"Oh," Shacklebolt says. His face doesn't seem to have the momentum to change. He takes a long sip of the nutrition potion, then downs the rest of it. James watches his throat work with it, Adam's apple poking out through the skin.

Across the table, Remus grunts, "Sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry," as he pulls a strip of gauze around the white-haired man's gouged face. Lily is crouching in front of the third man, a towering central-American auror who James recognises but hasn't spoken to directly before, appearing barely conscious. His long limbs are splayed around him like broken branches.

"Did anybody die?" James asks, before he can help it.

"If anybody did, we didn't see it," Shacklebolt replies, seeming a little more like he knows what he's doing in that moment. "It all happened very quickly."

"Did you know the raid was coming? Moody said he'd try to sneak the message in."

"No," Shacklebolt says shortly. He rubs his face, then stares around, taking the whole room in. "Where are we?"

"Lambeth," Remus speaks up. "Lambeth, London. Few miles out from Order headquarters."

"And who are you?"

"A resistance group," James supplies. "We've been operational for, uh, a few months now. Since he took over."

"He... took over?"

James and Remus exchange uneasy looks.

"How much do you know?" James asks.

Shacklebolt's piercing, dark stare meets his for the first time. "Nothing," he says. "They've told us nothing."

"Fuck," Lily says, not looking away from her job of patching up the auror. "Fuck."

"Dumbledore's dead," James bursts out. Tear off the bandage. Flash of burnt flesh and skin sinking through the hollows of bone. Shit.

Shacklebolt stares. "Excuse me?"

"He was killed at the wedding," James carries on. "Your fellow prisoners, did they not tell you anything?"

"I was only housed in the same cell with one," Shacklebolt gets out. "Werewolf."

Remus flinches.

"Oh," James says. "It's... it's been a long few months. The ministry fell. The minister for magic is imperiused. Hogwarts has been taken, too."

"Oh," Shacklebolt echoes. He stares down at the tabletop for a long stretch of silence. "That's..." He trails off.

"Sorry to pile it all on you at once."

"It's okay."

"We're Padfoot's Army," James says, mostly just to say something at all. "It's mostly just the three of us, for now. We run a delivery service. Communications stuff. To help the Order and other resistance groups."

The white-haired man groans, chin rolling around onto his chest. "You're kids," he grounds out.

"Yeah," James agrees. No counter to that, he supposes. They are.

"We can't exactly go back to Hogwarts," Lily says. "Muggleborn. Blood traitor. And, uh, Remus." She wipes sweat off her forehead with the back of her hand. "James, help me splint his leg. It's the best we can do 'til we get him to Hackney."

James darts out of his seat to go help her. The tall, broken-branch auror has passed out already, which makes him feel only marginally less guilty for the carelessness with which he sets about setting the broken bone.

"There," Lily murmurs. "Feel the break with your thumb, try to align the ankle. There. Yeah. Here's the splint--"

They work together, mostly silent. Lily presses her shoulders tight against his and James presses back. He can feel Shackbolt's stare burning into the nape of his neck.

"It'll be a few hours 'til an Order member comes to pick you all up," Remus says. "Tea, anybody?"

"I'll take one, Moony," James says, when nobody else answers. "The Tetley's ones."

"I know," Remus says. On his way to the kettle, he kneels down to hug Lily around the ribs. "Breathe, Lily."

"Yeah." And she sucks in a sharp, deep breath. "I'm okay. I'm just squeamish."

"I can finish this," James promises. "Go sit down."

"But--"

"Go!" he urges, forcing it to come out like it's funny, like it's fond. Like this is all fine.

"Okay," Lily murmurs. She staggers to her feet and sits on the kitchen counter. Remus knocks the side of his head against James', soft hair brushing his cheek (he smells of menthol shampoo, James wants to crawl into his skin and live there), then gets up and finishes the journey to the kettle and fills it up in the rusty sink.

By the time James is done splinting the auror's leg, his knees are aching from kneeling on the floor. He pulls himself up against the table, taking his mug from Remus, and reoccupies his seat beside Shackbolt. Halfheartedly, Lily shuffles around between their guests, offering aspirin and asking where it hurts.

"I'm alright," Shackbolt says stiffly, when she reaches him. "Thank you."

"Don't thank us," Lily replies, looking like she might cry. She glances between James and Shackbolt, seeming on the edge of initiating some kind of conversation between them.

"I was at the wedding," James sighs, feeling the weight of the statement leave him. "In the summer."

"Who are you?" Shacklebolt asks again.

"James Potter."

His eyes change. "Sirius Black's friend."

James thinks he would be fine with being referred to as Sirius Black's friend only for the rest of his numbered days. "Yeah," he mutters. "When you spoke to Andromeda Black in the summer. That was me. Polyjuice."

"Oh." Shacklebolt's face goes very strange. James gets the impression that he, too, struggles to remember that time.

"I'm glad you're out of there," James says sincerely, and hopes it's enough to mean something. "When we heard they'd gotten you..."

Shacklebolt shakes his head. "You shouldn't have been there," he says. "You're children."

James doesn't deny it. "I was sixteen." *I am sixteen.*

"That's still too young."

"I know."

"Then why?"

"They took our friend," Remus says. He squeezes in next to James on the chair and they each sit with half their asses on the cushion, half off, legs pressed together like parallel lines.

"Dumbledore told us a few of his friends knew," Shacklebolt says. "'Padfoot'?"

"That was his nickname."

"He's probably dead."

"He got out," Lily says. She gets up and rifles through their magazine stand on the counter, pulling out a copy of the prophet and flicking to the back page, where Sirius' wanted poster sits, his handsome young face glaring out at them all. She thrusts it in front of Shacklebolt. "The rebellion has changed since you were captured."

"He's the most wanted person in magical Britain," Remus says, an edge of pride and misery in equal measure curtailing it.

Shacklebolt sits back in his seat. He rubs his tired, thin face with both hands, thumbs hollowing his gaunt cheeks. "You're children," he says again.

"It's fight them or run," James butts in, a little indignant. "You should see some of the kids we've rescued. They're butchering people. We're lucky to be in London. We're lucky not to be homeless. We're lucky to be alive."

"And Moody allowed this?"

"Moody isn't the boss of us."

Shacklebolt looks at James again, hard in the eyes, like he can stab right through him with that hard stare. They search one another. "The Order I knew wouldn't take child soldiers."

"The Order you knew died with Dumbledore."

"Let's not fight," Lily interrupts. Her face is pale with distraught when James looks at her. "Please. Not right now. You'll be gone soon, back to Order HQ."

"Sorry," Shacklebolt replies, a little roughly, not without kindness. "It... I hadn't realised it had been six months."

"Sorry," James echoes. "It's a lot. I know."

"We're at war," Remus agrees grimly. He hooks his arm around James' and their mugs of tea click together between them. "Lots of people have died."

"But we've still got hope," James caveats.

"And we're fighting," Lily finishes.

Shacklebolt nods, not seeming to agree, not seeming to understand, even, but willing to drop it.

The night sets in around them. The sounds of London nightlife and the Thames set in like plagues. Remus stirs more milk into their tea and it swirls in white circles against the surface, the colour of blindness. Lily spends most of that time wringing her shaking hands in her lap and stepping out of the room to pace around.

An hour later, midnight cozying in, James falls asleep against Remus' shoulder. By that point, the two of them are almost in each other's laps, feet knotted together, and Lily has shuffled the injured auror off to lie on a blow-up mattress in the hallway under a pile of their coats and a quilt. The warmth of the apartment and the cool of the tiles under James' bare feet set him into a spinning equilibrium.

It's around midnight when he wakes up again, dozy and not entirely there. He keeps his eyes closed and breathes in the smell of Remus' neck.

"And he was Welsh?" Remus is asking, an arm narrow-angled around James' throat.

"From Caerphilly, he said, "Shacklebolt's low, wrecked voice rumbles from James' other side. "That's where they captured him. In March. Morning after a full. He didn't stand a chance."

"I never knew there were..." Remus trails off. "I didn't know there was a pack in South Wales."

"Me, neither."

"And they kept him... for what? Ransom?"

"I don't think it was a personal thing," Shacklebolt says stallingly. "I think their plan is to... domesticate. Capture. Starvation. Registration."

"Oh," Remus says in a very small voice.

James presses closer to his neck and falls asleep again.

Pads,

The raid went okay. It's been a day, and from what we've heard from the Friends, who heard it from the Order, three people died, but it would've been a lot more if not for Lily and her inventions. She's the best thing that's happened to us. I'm sure I've told you that before. I must have written you enough letters to fill books by now.

Remus is strange and quiet. Shacklebolt's cellmate was a werewolf and I think that messed with his head. They talked about it but I don't remember much. Lily's proud of herself, still, with the potions and everything, but even she seems jumpy. I think seeing injury and blood and everything like that got to them. I think seeing Rosier Wedding all over again got to ME. I'm gonna be having

nightmares about it for weeks. Wish I'd asked you for tips about those while you were still here.

I don't really know what to write in this one. It's been a while since I couldn't find the words for you. Shacklebolt was upset, very upset, when we spoke to him. He said we're children and the old Order wouldn't have accepted us. Maybe he's right. Goes to show.

I dunno. I love you. It's hard to talk about. Hard to word it right. It's almost Christmas, though! Two days away. I hope that'll be good. And, hey, Marlene and Mary were okay, even with strangers in the flat. They're both doing alright. Clinging on, I mean. So that's good.

Love you. Stay safe out there, usual drill.

Yours,

Prongs.

"I think we should do it once classes start again," Lily says, on Christmas eve morning.

James looks up from his job cutting snowflakes out of printer paper. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." She kneads the gingerbread dough a little more aggressively, pale hands working in rolling circles through the stiff mass of it. The glass mixing bowl clinks assertively on the countertop. "Yeah, I think. Once things are busier again, we'll be less likely to be noticed. Second week of January might work, I think."

"What's your plan with the mailbox?" Remus asks, sweeping James' abandoned paper scraps into the bin.

"I'm going to put something living in there," Lily explains. "A bug or a bird. And if that... kills it... well..." She trails off. "We'll have to find another way. But if it works, that's when we infiltrate."

"Okay," James agrees, mostly because none of them are strong or energised enough for debate or disagreement. Tis the bloody season, he supposes, and sticks his papercut thumb between his teeth to stop the sting.

"We should try to see Pete, if we can," Remus puts in. "I worry about him a lot."

James often feels like he doesn't worry enough. "Yeah," he says again.

"Right," Lily agrees. She flours the counter and slaps the dough down across it with an almost heavenly vengeance to the motion. "And after, we can take the cloak and go to the Slytherin common room."

"The password," James starts.

"It's not a password," Lily sighs. "If we go by night, nobody will be in the common room. You have to... you have to present your blood status."

"I'll go," James says immediately. "You two can stay in Gryffindor Tower. Catch up with the students."

The silent agreement that they're not going to tell the Order about this goes unsaid. Whatever *the fourth* is, it lies between the three of them and the three of them alone.

Lily chews her lip. "Okay," she says, looking like she wants to say something else. "Where's the rolling pin?"

The winter sun trails through the sky outside, bright through the white clouds. It's not due to snow at all this week. James finishes making snowflakes and hangs them in the window, and off the handles of the fridge. Lily cuts the dough into meticulous wand-shaped strips, handle and all, laying them on their only baking tray and sliding it into the blackened oven set into the wall.

"The cooker likes to play up," she tells Remus. "Can you keep an eye on them to make sure they don't burn? I've got a book I want to go lend to Mary."

"Okay," Remus agrees benevolently.

"You should tell them to come out and join the festivities," James offers. "I'm gonna make pigs in blankets with Remus soon, ready for tomorrow."

"I'll ask," Lily assents. "I think they'll want to be with us tomorrow, though. It's just hard."

"I know," James says. "We all got them both something, right?"

Lily squints at something written on the back of her hand. "Oh, shit," she says. "Weren't you going to buy a tube of *Heroes* for the Order, Remus?"

"Oh," Remus gasps. "When do the shops close?"

"I'll go with you," James offers immediately. Anything to abate the cabin fever.

"You're still wanted--"

James waves Remus off. "It's Christmas," he says. "Even if they're still out looking for me now, it'll be too busy for them

to spot me. I'm stealthy."

"I would apply many words to you, Prongs," Remus sighs. "Stealthy isn't one of them. Come on, we'll bring the cloak just in case. And it's five degrees out, you should take my big coat, the brown one..."

"Muggles do Christmas like nobody else," Remus sighs, as he and James wander around big Tesco's.

"I don't think it compares to Hogwarts," James replies. He buries his hands deep into his pockets. "They don't heat these shops, I swear."

"I think that's just you."

"Right."

Remus sighs. He leans over and plucks a metal tube of cheese bites off the shelf. "They're half price," he says. "Look. They're shaped like Christmas trees. My da used to buy them for Christmas back home."

"Ooh," James says, for effect.

"Can we?"

"If you want to." James glances up at the pipe-veined ceiling. "It's your money."

"It's our money," Remus says halfheartedly, looking pleased. He rolls the tube into their shopping basket, which sits on James' arm.

James follows him into the next aisle, where Remus stares between two different boxes of cereal, weighing them up in

his spindly hands. Sparkly green and red spirals hang at intervals from the ceiling, and Remus is tall enough that the top of his head almost brushes one.

By the time they make it out of the shop, they've picked up far more than they needed (new stamps, sugary cereal, lots of snack foods, a plastic punnet of cream cheese, a new candle, a box of matchsticks, and more toilet cleaner). James carries the bags and Remus shuffles along beside him, their arms brushing. They take the riverside walk, because it's far prettier, golden lights sparkling on the water, laughter ringing down the street. Lambeth is lovely, even James has to admit. It's no Hogsmede at Christmas, but it's something quite special by its own merit.

"We never talked about it," Remus says, when they're about five minutes out of the shops. "You and me."

"Talked about what?"

"The kiss. That first one. In the common room."

"Oh," James says. "Yeah, I guess we didn't."

"Guess we didn't need to," Remus agrees. He shakes his head, huffing a laugh through his nose. "You told me it wasn't the same without him."

"That was an awful thing to say."

Remus laughs in the back of his throat. The sound of it rumbles through James, seismic. "You've said lots of awful things," he says. "Remember when we lay in your bed before OWLs and I held you there for hours and you told me, and we'd been kissing for months, you told me you might date Lily someday?"

James wrinkles his nose. "Oh, fuck. Did I? That's terrible."

"I should have shoved you onto the floor."

"You're an angel for not doing so."

"I worried for a long time that you'd meant it."

James hates himself for a burning moment. "Course I didn't. I was... clinging to something. To make me feel like myself."

"I know that. I know you." Remus turns to look over the river, collar turned up against the cold. "Guess I assumed my luck with love was so hapless I would just... have you and then not. That it was just going to go away. At the time. But I don't think that anymore."

"I'm not going anywhere," James says, rather lamely.

Remus nods. "I know that."

"Still. I mean it."

"I know you do. I'm not worried."

They slip into quiet again. James steps on a greying cigarette butt, set into the ashy cracks of the pavement stone. The plastic handles of his Tesco shopping bags pull down against his hands, sore and red.

"You were right," Remus says, after some time. "It wasn't the same without him."

"I'm glad you agreed with me then." James reconsiders.

"I'm glad you agree with me now."

"I figured out I was in love with him in second year," Remus says. "Took me a bit longer with you. I think Sirius and I

bonded over being jealous of Lily Evans."

"Ha." James stares at the ground. *How much didn't I know about you?* he asks again, in his head.

"We kissed for the first time at the start of third. Sitting on the ledge outside the window of the dorm."

"Oh."

"It wasn't a thing," Remus carries on. "It didn't mean anything, really. Or if it did, to him, he didn't say anything."

"Did it mean anything to you?"

"Doesn't matter much now."

"Of course it does."

Remus shrugs. "It was always you," he says. "And it was always him. And it was always the both of you. And I'm fine to just exist like this. In the middle. Or off to the side."

James comes to a halt. Feeling sort of floaty, he crosses to stand by the railing overlooking the water. Remus stands beside him. He puts his Tesco bags down at his side, resting against his calves.

"That's not how I want this to be," James says eventually. "Not with me or him, or with Lily."

"We don't have to talk about this," Remus offers. "We can leave it. Like last year."

"You matter."

"I know that."

"No," James says. "I don't think you do."

He glances across at Remus, who looks pensive, staring down into the black water. Silence festers between them for some time. The cream cheese is going to separate and go watery if they don't get it into the fridge soon but James doesn't mention it.

"I don't like the way you talk about yourself," James carries on. "Sometimes. Your dad kicked us out and you never talked to us about it, and you acted like you deserved it, and you're sad about it but you talk like you don't have a right to be. And the Order treats you like a monster and you act like they're right to."

"James."

"I don't think I've ever heard you ask somebody to apologise to you."

"We should get home," Remus cuts in.

"I don't want you to think--"

"James," Remus pushes over him. "James. I'm okay."

"Never said you weren't."

"Then drop it." He hesitates. "Please?"

James stares at him imploringly. "We'll talk about this," he tries. "After the next full. Okay? It's the day after New Year's, isn't it? We can talk about it then."

Remus closes his eyes very tight. "Okay," he agrees, not seeming to mean it. "We can do that."

They walk the rest of the way home in silence. Grey sleet begins to fall, too thick and heavy to look much like snow. Wrapped-up people flood up and down the walkway in small bunches, laughing and talking. Remus takes one of the shopping bags wordlessly.

By the time they get to the door to the flat, James figures they've both mustered the energy to act normal and jovial around Lily, so he smiles at Remus as he unlocks the door, and Remus smiles back.

There's somebody in their kitchen.

James startles. "Lily--" he starts to yell.

They turn around. It's Jeremiah, from the Friends. Tall and curly-haired, looking as grim as death. "Alright, lads?" he asks.

"Oh, fuck," James gasps, leaning against the doorframe and dropping his shopping bag. "It's just you. Gave me the fright of my life."

The Friends have never visited their apartment before. Nobody has, outside of the raid the other night and Mary and Marlene. It's felt very much like a small, private refuge. James had forgotten people were allowed to visit.

Remus picks up James' abandoned shopping bag. "You okay?"

"Fine," James confirms, clutching his chest. "You alright, Jeremiah?"

"Just fine," Jeremiah replies, stony-faced.

"Not that it's not good to see you," Remus puts in, kicking the door closed with his heel. "But what are you doing here?"

He beckons them in. Remus and James shuffle into the kitchen. Jeremiah is standing with his palms atop one of their chairs, and Lily is sitting at the other end of the table. She looks up at them, and she looks absolutely devastated.

"Oh," James murmurs. He rushes to her side. "What happened?"

Lily sniffs, wiping her nose with the back of her sleeve. Her face and eyes are very red. She's more distraught than James has ever seen her.

"It's nothing awful," she says thickly. "Nobody's died."

Remus puts their shopping bags down on the countertop and sits beside Lily, taking her hand.

"What happened?" James asks, turning to Jeremiah.

"There's been some unfortunate developments in the Ministry," Jeremiah sighs. "Gambit thought the three of you should know, and Moody's got me to come here. It's coming out in the papers tomorrow. We just found out."

"What is it?"

"They're going to make all potions ingredients above XX rarity restricted substances," Jeremiah tells them. "That's pretty much all potions ingredients outside of stuff that overlaps with muggle chemicals. Virtually all creature hides, blood, hair, not to mention plants... pretty much anything. I mean, he's already done this with XXX rarity

substances, and any magical weapons, too. Back in August. But this makes the whole situation worse."

"Oh," James says. "That's... what does that mean?"

Jeremiah coughs. "It means it'll be illegal to transport them into the country or sell them without putting them through ministry records first. They're setting up a whole task force for it."

James furrows his brow, glancing at Lily, who still looks utterly devastated. "We'll still be able to find a way to make potions, Lils. You don't have to..."

Remus startles, then, like something's hit him. "Oh," he says. "The raid."

"What?" James asks, feeling out of the loop.

Lily rubs her face with both hands, opens her mouth, then closes it again.

"It's going to make our job a lot harder. Especially the Order's job. Healing drafts, medicinal magic, wandmaking, potions..." Jeremiah shakes his head. "Not to mention how troublesome it'll be to brew Polyjuice now, which we rely on. It means they can price gouge ingredient sales, too, which will make dittany and the like harder to get our hands on, since pain relief and healing ingredients will be the first to go. It'll be how they starve us out like rats. And since most of us can't even apparate out of the country without setting off the Trace..."

"That sucks," James puts in. He feels like he's missing something. "Why are... why are we crying about it?"

"James," Remus says, like a teacher. "It's because they must have put together the dots that whoever stole all those potions ingredients from Diagon Alley helped with the raid. Because of Lily's creations."

Lily buries her face in her hands and makes a miserable noise.

"Oh," James says. He feels very stupid. "Oh."

"All potions vendors on Diagon Alley and in the rest of the country are shutting down shop," Jeremiah sighs. "They're going to have to start working for the Ministry now, selling through them. Without the right paperwork and blood purity, it's gonna be virtually impossible to get our hands on any of it."

"And it's because of me," Lily spits, so angry that it's almost a sob. She tugs on her fringe hard enough that the skin around it strains. "Because I thought I could be clever, and now... now they all... they don't trust us anymore."

"It doesn't matter," James says emphatically. "You saved their lives. The raid would've failed if it wasn't for you."

"As correct as that may be," Jeremiah sighs. "That's not all the bad news."

"Fuck," James says.

"You're all under house arrest."

Remus and James both leap up from their seats.

"What?" James demands, outraged.

"You can't do that!" Remus cries.

Jeremiah shoots them an apologetic shrug. "It's not my decision," he says. "The Order wants you all here unless it's necessary to get out. Remus, for your job, and to open your mailbox, too. Aside from that, they're going get an Order member to bring supplies and collect outgoing mail, and they want you staying at home base unless absolutely necessary."

"How long?" James demands.

A wince. "Until you're all of age."

"No!" Remus shouts.

"Absolutely not! That's in... that's in more than three months!" James protests.

Jeremiah sighs. "We don't think it's very fair either," he says. "Even though stealing those supplies was very stupid of you all."

Lily lets out a half-sob.

"But I'd suggest you listen to them," Jeremiah carries on, a little more gently. "For the most part, anyway. And next time... tell us when you want to do something like that. Us or the Order. Just... an adult. Or a handful of adults. We can help."

"We wanted to prove ourselves," James tries to justify.

"And it didn't work. War doesn't work that way."

"But it helped," Remus offers, sounding quite devastated. He sinks back into his seat. "It helped them."

"It did." Jeremiah looks between each of them. He looks quite sad. "Because you're all very, very talented young people. And what you did was smart and resourceful, and it got most of them out alive. It was remarkable, really. Some of those brews were completely new inventions. We'd never seen anything like it. One of those healing drafts got Lyric out alive. You saved *Direct Action*, too."

"Then why are we being punished?"

"Because we can't win the war with talent and wit. We need to win by working together. And, erm, relying on the adults around us," Jeremiah says. He shrugs his coat back on. "I need to run. I'm sorry. The rest send their love. And Merry Christmas to you all."

Lily wipes her eyes and stands up, chest heaving. She rushes out of the room past him. The door to the bedroom opens and then slams shut.

"Hope she's okay," Jeremiah offers awkwardly. "Bye."

He leaves, closing the front door behind him. It closes, and James imagines it sounds like prison bars clanking shut.

Remus drops his hands into his lap, looking quite lost. Their cream cheese has definitely separated by now. James feels very sick, the nausea swelling inside of him like an ocean. They swim in thick silence. James thinks he can hear Lily crying through the wall.

"Shit," Remus exclaims then, standing up and running to the oven. When he opens it, a wave of black smoke comes billowing out in his face.

"Oh, fuck," James says.

Remus jumps into action, coughing. Cradling the baking tray with a tea towel draped over his hand, he pulls it out and drops it on top of the stove, where it clatters. They both stare down at the burnt remains of Lily's gingerbread wands, blackened and cracked beyond edibility.

The smoke sets the fire alarm off. James sighs very heavily and drops his head onto his arms.

Pads,

It's 11:30 on Christmas Eve. We originally planned to stay up til midnight to wait for Santa (whoever that is), but this afternoon sucked (we're on house arrest) and we've sort of decided not to do that now, I guess. Remus has gone to sleep. Lily's sitting on the stoop to cry on her own. And I'm in the kitchen.

This is going to be a long one, probably, so buckle in! Buckle. Haha. You would've laughed at that one.

Two years ago, I went home for Christmas break and I spent it with my parents. Moony came over for Boxing Day and we ate cold turkey sandwiches and he hates flying, but I managed to get him to come for a ride with me on my new broom (Christmas present from my dad, remember?), and he only complained for about half of it. That Christmas was the first time I remember thinking I'd want to spend the rest of my life knowing him. I'd thought that about you for a long time, but with him it just sort of tied it all together. Everything in the world seemed to just start making sense with that.

Six months later, you went missing. And that summer sucked (or, at the time, I guess I thought it sucked. Things have gotten worse.) and I hated you for some of it, though I

never wrote that bit down. All those letters are lost now, probably burned in the fireplace at Grimmauld. I mostly wrote happy stuff. But it was lonely. Even Moony couldn't break me out of it. I was angry and scared and all that anger and fear boiled up inside of me until I was facing down your corpse in a boggart at Padfoot's Army meetings, and throwing up on the carpet in Dumbledore's office, and that whole year was a stupid awful blurry grief haze and I'm glad I'm not at Hogwarts anymore, is that selfish? I'm glad. Fuck that place and whatever it was without you.

I don't know what point I'm getting at. I guess I want a milestone. Some moment in time I can point at and say 'hey, that's when I knew, that's when we kissed, that's when Sirius told me he loved me'. Remus says you do. I don't know if I believe him but I'd like to. But there isn't a milestone. I don't have one. I'd like to make one, but I can't find the right moment in time, not with the war getting worse every day. Lily's so broken up about it all, you know? She feels so helpless. And I'm not even a good enough friend to help her.

Soon enough, it'll be two years since you disappeared and one year since I last saw you. I've sort of given up hope on getting you home for Christmas, Pads. We got you gifts, you know that? Remus wouldn't tell you this, but he paid for the ones I got for you, so technically they're all from him. Thank him for me, when you open them. Or when you open this. Whichever comes first.

I don't know how much I can stand to write down here. I'll say the important stuff: Moony is the best person on the planet, better than you or me. I don't think I'll know what to do with myself til I see you again, even if it's in ten years, or never. Christmas used to be easy but now it just feels like ghosts and stuff. I feel like I've exhausted all the

right words. I feel like we're all falling apart. We burnt Lily's gingerbread cookies.

I dunno, Padfoot. I hope you're having a good Christmas, wherever you are. Hope you got me something too, you prick. Moony, too. Out in wild, wild Europa.

Yours,

Prongs.

Christmas is quiet and sad. They all get up later than they had wanted to, which gives the day the distinct impression that it's slipping through their fingers. *This might be the last Christmas you see*, the walls whisper at James as he drinks his first coffee of the day at eleven in the morning. He doesn't have the energy to shut them up.

He and Moony undercook the pigs in blankets, and their Christmas dinner is with chicken and not turkey. For the most part, they don't talk, outside of the occasional joke. Marlene says the snowflakes in the window look good, and James thinks that counts for a small win. They exchange presents. Remus has gotten James a jacket of his own, so he doesn't have to keep stealing his, a high-collared, square-patterned thing, heavily knitted in brown and red. Lily gets him a fancy muggle fountain pen with the Welsh dragon printed on the side.

After, they all cluster around the radio to listen to the Queen's speech at three, which James has never done before. It's mildly exciting. She doesn't say much exciting stuff.

"We may feel powerless alone," she finishes with, in her tailored southeast accent that reminds him of Sirius. "But

the joint efforts of individuals can defeat the evils of our time." And then something about creating a stable society that James filters out.

"What's going on with the muggles?" he asks Lily sleepily.

Tucked against his side, she shrugs. "There's always something," she says, and when James looks at her, her eyes are closed.

After the speech is over, they all end up lying on the floor in the kitchen, watching the ceiling, stuffed with mediocre food and very tired. 1976 has tried to kill each of them in painfully similar ways. James thinks, for the first time, the five of them are feeling a sort of unity, here among the scraps of wrapping paper and the lingering burnt smell.

"Thanks," Marlene says, after a while. "Y'know. It means a lot."

"It's fine," Remus murmurs, mostly on principle, James thinks.

"Nah. We haven't been easy to deal with."

"We're not in this for things to be easy," Lily protests.

"Let me thank you."

"Okay," Lily sighs, sounding displeased. "Thank you both for being here. And reaching out. And everything."

Marlene hesitates. "I want to leave," she says.

Mary sits bolt upright. "What?"

"Not quite yet." Marlene shrugs. "My birthday's in a bit. Once I'm of age. I wanna get out of Britain."

"But you--" Mary's voice is very choked. "You can't go."

"I know you're--"

"What about Dorcas?"

Marlene heaves a very heavy sigh. "One of these days," she says, an air of savagery to it, "I'm going to off myself if I have to keep living where they are. It's driving me insane."

James winces. He decides, again, against saying anything at all.

"I can't be on my own," Mary says desperately. She sounds on the edge of a panic attack.

"I just need some time alone."

"What are you going to do?" Lily asks.

Marlene hesitates. "I want to travel into Europe," she says. "Meet some wizards. I dunno. Anywhere that isn't here. I can't... I can't," she finishes.

Mary sits against the kitchen counter, wrapping her arms around her knees. "I can't leave Dorcas," she whispers.

"Then stay. I'll come back," Marlene promises. James feels like he's intruding on something very personal. "I promise. Once the war's over."

"What if the war's never over?!" Mary demands.

"Then you can get Dorcas and come to me," Marlene replies, like it should be obvious, and James thinks of Remus and of Sirius, and he thinks he understands very well what she means.

Mary wipes her face with a shaking hand. "Stay for a while longer."

"Of course."

"You'll still have us," Lily tells Mary, sitting up to put an arm around her. "Marlene, are you...?"

"I'm sure."

"Right." Lily clears her throat. "We'll save up to get you a ticket for a boat across the English Channel, then."

"Thanks," Marlene murmurs. When James looks at her, she's smiling faintly at the ceiling. For the first time since she got here, she looks at peace, and that sort of saves Christmas, doesn't it?

James and Remus,

Merry Christmas! I got your last letter, sorry it took so long for me to reply.

I'm doing okay, for the most part. It's hard to know what to talk about. It's lonely without you guys. Please don't tell anybody I talked to you. I've made some new friends, though! Nobody important. Mostly Hufflepuffs.

They say you're out there killing people. The insurgents, like you guys. Is that true?

Hope you're both okay.

Love,

Peter.

On the day after New Year's Day, like clockwork, James and Remus take the train to the south-east and Remus sleeps on James' shoulder on the way there, chin lolling against his collarbone. The bright white sun pierces through the train's grubby windows, and James writes a letter to Sirius, even when his wrist starts to cramp and the blister on his forefinger pops. He's been getting lots of those lately. He likes to imagine he'll get arthritis someday, and he'll get to complain about it in some cottage by the sea in South Wales and get prescribed medication for it and forget to take his pills most of the time. Remus and Sirius would laugh at him and everything would be okay.

They take their usual hike up through the fields, from the coast into a dense patch of forest. James is a little too fast and Remus diligently keeps up. By the time the sun begins to set, they've made it to a sufficiently rural patch of field a little earlier than usual.

"Sit with me," Remus says, dropping down in a long tractor path through a field of fallow soil. He flops onto his back.

James lies beside him. They watch the purpling sky together as it comes out in cloudy bruises, which climb off past the sun and away from the sea.

"You should get changed," James says, when dusk has closed in. "Y'know."

"Yeah," Remus sighs. He stands up and strips off, handing James his clothes. "My dignity."

"Nothing I haven't seen before."

"I know." Remus lies down on top of him. "Bet there's ants."

"It's January."

"Still."

They stay like that for another half hour before Remus rolls away, grunting. "Change," he groans. "Fuck."

James stands up and, in the same motion, shifts. In a patch of silver moonlight, before him, Remus transforms, bones creaking out under his skin, fur pushing from the dimples of his skin like it's growing from his goosebumps. James watches the snout and teeth tear free from Remus' face, and then they are a deer and a wolf watching each other.

For the first time, and perhaps 1977 is going to make him lose his touch, James thinks the wolf is quite beautiful.

Remus raises his head and howls towards the marauding moon. James whinnies and scuffs a hoof across the ground, and then they're running together.

By the time dawn breaks across the grey horizon, dawning over the sea and casting it into strange shades of grey-brown like shadows, Remus has tucked out, lying against James in the thicket of a nearby patch of overgrowth. The transformation back is oddly peaceful, and Remus the wolf gnaws toothily on James' leg to dull the pain of it until he's Remus the human again.

James shifts back. "Clothes," he grunts.

Remus slops over into his arms. "That one wasn't too bad," he says faintly, into the juncture of James' neck where his shoulder starts.

"Guess it wasn't," James admits, running a hand over Remus' bony, pimply back. "Come on. In."

He shuffles Remus back into a sweater and loose muggle jeans. Remus sits against the trunk of a tree as James pulls his socks and shoes on for him, and then they stagger up out of the forest together and back to the high-strung fields, so they can sit there as they always do, and watch light streak across the waters of the channel for miles out.

"He seemed calmer this time," James comments, when they've settled in a patch of rapeseed flowers to watch the sun come up. "The wolf."

Remus nods against him. He's slumped halfway to the ground, back bent strangely, leaning against James' ribs. It's a bit uncomfortable, but everything is.

"Yeah," he says. "He's less angry. Dunno why."

"Any ideas?"

"I'll let you know if I think of something," Remus replies loftily. "Sorry for chewing on your leg."

"Didn't even break the skin," James buffs off. "I'm fine, you can chew me up a bit. Doesn't bother me."

Remus vibrates with a laugh, though James doesn't hear it. They sit in comfortable quiet for some time. It might as well just be the two of them on this whole island. It still smells, and the morning chorus is reaching deafening levels. None of that feels like it matters too much.

"Lily's sad," Remus sighs. "I think she'll be sad for a while."

"Don't know why she blamed herself," grumbles James. "It's not like she did anything wrong."

"It's because the potions, and the ministry stunt, and everything we've done, it makes her feel like she's in control," Remus sighs. "She misses her family, she misses her friends. She misses Hogwarts, more than you or I do. And now she feels useless again."

"But she's not."

"I know that. She doesn't."

"Then we need to convince her."

Remus is quiet for a while. Eventually, he rolls over so his arms are tucked up into James' midriff. He's taller than James by a wide margin, which makes it a little awkward, but they make it work.

"I've been thinking," he says.

And James knows then.

"Thinking what?" he asks, though he doesn't need to.

"Thinking there are things I should be doing," Remus murmurs. "Things I haven't been doing, I mean."

"Remus."

"James."

James doesn't sit up. He wants to, but he fears it would shatter this moment and then neither of them would ever recover from it.

"Don't do this," he murmurs. "Stay."

"I would follow you anywhere, y'know," Remus says, as if it's a fact of life. Like it doesn't need saying at all. "I would

follow you anywhere, any time. Don't care where you're going. If you told me to come with you, I would."

"Then stay here."

"I don't think..." Remus hesitates. "I think I want to. Stay with you, I mean. Which is saying a lot."

"Remus."

"But I think I've spent way too long caring about what I want."

"Remus."

"And this is a war."

James feels angry tears burn in his eyes. "Shacklebolt said something to you," he chokes.

Remus hesitates. "There's a pack in Wales," he whispers, right against James' ribs, like he can keep the secret there and grow it like a houseplant and protect it from the rain. "There's a pack in South Wales. So close to where I'm from. And Voldemort's hunting them."

"Remus--"

"I could connect them with the Order! Get them on side, get them fighting with us. Get them out of the country, even, if they don't want to fight."

James wipes his face with a dusty hand. "You are not valuable," he snaps, "because of what you are. You don't owe anybody anything. You don't owe them for shit."

Remus shakes his head. "I haven't made the decision yet."

"Yes, you have."

"I don't come of age 'til March."

James gets up, then, so roughly that Remus goes scattering across the dirt like broken glass. They stare at one another, James standing, panting, Remus in bits on the ground.

"I just think if one of us finds Sirius," Remus says, voice shaking. "It should be you."

"That's not what this is about."

"Of course it's not. But it's a bit of it." Remus stares out over the field and his face crumples. "It's always him, in the end."

James stands there, breathing heavily, trying to find the right thing to say or shout. Overhead, a bird of prey swoops towards the horizon, cawing. He gets the distinct impression that something is ending. The world blurs.

"Don't be sad," Remus murmurs. "Please don't be sad."

"Fuck off," James snaps. "Just fuck off, Remus."

And without another word, he turns away and storms down the hill towards town, and leaves Remus sitting there in the yellow flowers and the dust.

Chapter End Notes

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RAGE

Chapter Notes

every day i wake up and listen to london thunder by foals and think abt sirius.....

i hope you enjoy this one! tws: mild body horror, trauma, violence, grooming, mental health issues, blood, injury.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Sirius' tired soul is old friends with death. He thinks he's going to know her intimately for as long as he lives, which probably won't be much longer, by the look on Tom's face as he stands in the doorway, cloak hanging like a cloud around him, face all thunderstorm.

"Came back for me, did you?" Sirius asks, before he can say anything. "Knew you couldn't stay away."

Tom doesn't move for some time. Biting wind curls in from behind him, draughty with the brisk cold of freedom. The stagnant air rises to meet it. Dust spirals in gusts from the floor. Sirius doesn't consider running, though; he's not stupid enough for that, not anymore.

Riddle closes the cell door behind him. He moves fluidly, like the ocean through a channel. Sirius closes his eyes until there is a cold hand on the side of his face.

When he looks again, Riddle is crouching in front of him. He wants to scramble away, but they broke his ankles last week, so he can't.

"Have I got something on my face?" Sirius asks. It comes out little more than a whisper.

The hand on his cheek slides to his chin and holds it, not hard. Riddle tilts his face from side to side. Sirius gets the impression he's being x-rayed.

"Get out of my head," he grunts. Then, more of a plea, "Please get out of my head. Please."

"Bold of you to make demands of me now, Sirius," Tom says, the first thing he's said since he got here. "After all of this."

"Just kill me," Sirius bites out. "I've got nothing left to give you. I'm not worth anything."

"You might be right about that," Riddle offers. "But I don't grant mercies."

As if to make his point, he steps, very slowly, an inch forward, and then rests the pad of his black shoe on Sirius' purple ankle and presses down.

"Fuck!" Sirius keens. "Fuck you!" A noise like a car crash rakes out of his throat. He grapples with the hand on his face, gouging his overlong nails through grey-white flesh. He gurgles on pain.

"Oh, that thought was quite unkind," Tom laughs, without humour. "You think me quite horrifying."

Sirius chokes on pain, chest full of it, hardly able to draw breath around it. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

"Was I more appealing with my hair? With a human face? You liked looking in the mirror and seeing me, didn't you?" Tom's hand snarls around the hinge of his jaw and cracks it

down and open, with a burst of pain so hot and acute it tastes like fucking petrol. Sirius sees stars. Universes. The whole Canis Majoris.

Nausea swells. Rotten fruit. "Fuck you," Sirius tries to say, but his mouth won't cooperate.

He blinks and Tom looks like he did when they first met; young, pale, a mass of dark hair like a curse around his face. And then he's back in his own body, and there is an abomination in front of him, a pale imitation of a man, yellow-eyed and grey-skinned, nothing husked inside his body but rage and the post-war Depression.

Pressure, right on the front of his forehead. Between Sirius' eyes.

"Get out of my head!" he shouts, loud enough to rattle the bars in the window. "Get out, get out!"

Riddle tightens his hand around Sirius' jaw and hurls him to the ground with it. There's a crack and then blood on the ground.

"I told you you were good at making friends," he croons, as Sirius catches three red teeth in his hand. "Three of them, aren't there? Closer to two, I suppose."

"Fucking stop!" Sirius hollers. He chokes and hacks, coughs up a fourth. The deathless grey of the stone under his face lurches.

"The half-breed and the blood traitor."

"If you fucking touch them, I'll fucking kill you," Sirius snarls. His jaw clicks every time he tries to move it. With a clumsy hand, he reaches up, trying to shove it into place. It

wobbles and sobs dangerously, teeth grinding off their hinges. Machinery gone rotten.

Tom doesn't grace that with a laugh. "I'll make you watch."

"I'll tear your fucking throat out," Sirius spits. "Fuck!"

"I'll crack their minds open. I'll make them forget their own names."

"Fucking stop," he begs. "Please."

"I'll let them bleed out," Tom says, deliberate. He's narrow as the edge of a knife and twice as sharp. He digs the tip of his wand into the gap between two of Sirius' ribs, twists. "And I'll bring them back, and I'll kill them again."

Sirius burns. The pyre rises up around him. In the back of his mind, he processes that. No magic can bring back the dead. He should know; he's been in a rapt tension with death for as long as he can remember. It stalked him into his second body, and it will follow him until it catches him.

"Bring them back," he chokes, half delirious, around his broken jaw. "Bring them back?"

Tom pauses. His face is blurry. Sirius squints to bring him into focus, and there's an odd glint in his yellow eyes, almost imperceptible.

He kneels down, leaning right up close to Sirius' face. They stare at one another. Sirius has never understood Tom, not in all his fifteen years, but he thinks he understands him better than anybody else.

"There's that hunger," Tom murmurs softly. "There it is."

"No."

"You can't hide anything from me."

"No," Sirius breathes. "I'm... I'm not. Hungry. Or anything. I'm nothing like that."

Tom smiles at him. "It wasn't a lie, you know," he says. His hand twitches and Sirius flinches.

The hit doesn't come. Sirius glances up. "The... bringing people back?"

Tom nods. "I can do it," he whispers. "I've done it before."

Death leers in through the walls. Sirius is heavy with nausea and lightened by fear all at once.

"Oh," he says.

Tom smiles at him. "I'll be back," he promises, and one of his grey hands grapples at Sirius' broken bone through the bruised skin, and the pain, like an earthquake, it closes in, it sweeps into every ounce of perception Sirius has left.

He comes awake burning.

The world is sound and heat. Fire whips in a bright, white lash against the rocky slope stretching into the grey sky beside him, and it sends slabs of ice shattering down to earth, hissing and steaming, great gusts of pale vapour stabbing into the air.

Sirius screams some expletive in English or Iceland or something, he's not sure. The fire lurches and spasms and curls with the wind into a bright shaft, and with it, an

unholy chorus of sound roars to life, howling and screeching. Sirius' hair buffets over his face and he scrabbles onto his stomach, army-crawling away with his elbows, getting bits of rock under his fingernails. He feels the heat will surely burn him into nothing.

"Hey!" somebody calls, voice very distant. "Hey! Sirius! Sirius--" And something long in Norwegian. "Fucking calm down!"

And this is living: mortal fear, blood in your mouth, repeat. With a great shout, Sirius rolls onto his back, clutching his burning arm to his stomach. The fire blooms down towards him, so close that the heat scorches his face, hot and bright as a birth.

"Stop!" Sirius yells. It tears his throat.

Immediately, flame fire dies, spinning into a tight whirl of hot air and lingering smoke. Sirius breathes in the smell of it.

"Fuck," he says, mostly to himself.

"You alright?" the voice calls.

Sirius looks up. Yí'ān is standing on the stone steps leading down into the bay, fifty feet away. The tide is way out, a black line in the distance. Under the heavy grey sky, all the birds that usually perch in the overhanging trees have left.

"Yeah!" Sirius calls back. "I'm okay! Sorry!"

"Want me to come over there?!"

"Yes! Please!"

Yí'ān's blurry little figure nods, picking its way down the steps. Sirius lies back in the rocks and reminds himself that he's a human. That he's alive. That he's more than a rippling fire or a mass of destructive urges.

In his lap, his hand twitches ominously, as if to disagree.

Crunching footsteps approach. Yí'ān's narrow face peers down at him. "Alright there, old boy?"

"I'm okay," Sirius confirms, exhausted. "How long did I sleep?"

"What time did you get off?"

"Uh, one. Ish."

"Solid four hours. Better than the rest of this week," Yí'ān offers. "So that's something."

Sirius squints up at him. "One of these days," he warns, "a muggle is gonna see."

"And you haven't met a memory modification quite as mean as Galina's," Yí'ān rebukes. "Can I sit?"

"Course," Sirius says hoarsely. He makes to shuffle back against a nearby slab of rock and only sort of half makes it.

Yí'ān sits beside him, hefting Sirius by his jacket up to sit against the stone. "There you go," he grins. "All fixed up."

"How bad was it this time?"

"Well," Yí'ān recounts, without much theatre to it, "the spinning fire tornado was only about thirty feet high, and you only destroyed about a foot's depth of the ice sheet. I

think you might have traumatised a few birds, too. All in all, not bad."

Sirius groans. "Fuck."

"It could be way worse. Hey. You're going into '77 with a bang, kid." Yí'ān nudges him. "Happy new year."

"That's today?"

"Think so."

"Oh," Sirius sighs.

"Morose, I see."

"I've slept ten hours in the past week," Sirius lists. "My arm is trying to kill me, the Dark Lord is trying to make me wish I was dead, and Galina's probably still angry at me for setting fire to the sofa, which is sort of worse than the first two combined. At least I actually like her."

"She's not still angry," Yí'ān snorts. "Annoyed, yes. Angry, no. She's got faith you can get through this. She's hoping we can move you back into the apartment by February."

Sirius has been sleeping on this rocky beach for three weeks now. The idea of another month of it makes him wish his arm would just get it over with, honestly.

"Hey, I'm glad somebody's got faith I can do it," he grumbles. "Makes one of us."

"Two of us. I think you can do it, too," Yí'ān says mildly.

Sirius elbows him. "Nah, you don't."

"I'm trying to be supportive! And for the record, yes, I do. I think there's tons you're capable of."

Sirius sighs. "Apparently, controlling my... whatever this is, it isn't one of those things."

"Give it some time."

"I almost destroyed the apartment. Twice."

"Thrice, if you count that first night, when you were still unconscious." A wince. "Sorry. Not exactly helping, am I?"

Sirius shrugs. "I don't need coddling."

"Yes, you do." Yí'ān sighs and rubs a hand over the top of Sirius' hair. "This needs a cut, you know. It's halfway down your back. Gonna be at your elbows soon enough."

"I'll get Galina to lend me hair pins or something."

"You think she's got any? You'd have better luck asking me."

Sirius sighs. "I'll cut it, if you want," he offers. "One of these days I'll catch it on fire or something anyway. It's a hazard."

"Ask Claude about it," Yí'ān laughs. "They reckon it suits you. They stopped by in the night, by the way."

"They did?!" Sirius tries not to feel indignant that they didn't come to see him.

"Yeah. Thought it was right funny that we've got you sleeping outside."

"You've got me sleeping two miles down the road from the apartment," Sirius protests. "That's not 'outside', you've

practically evicted me."

"Only temporarily."

"Still eviction, since I'm off the property. Don't you lot hate landlords, anyway?"

Yí'ān scoffs. "Our little socialist," he says fondly. "What was it about this time?"

Sirius hesitates. "Rosier Manor," he gets out. "That's where they kept me, uh, before I was here."

"Ah."

"Death and stuff. The dream, I mean. Very cheerful."

"Right."

"They broke my ankles."

Yí'ān's grip gets very tight on his shoulder. "Jesus, Sirius," he says. "You can't just say stuff like that."

"Sorry."

"It's fine."

Sirius glances at his friend. Yí'ān is staring hard at the ground, an odd, pensive expression on his Jamesish face.

"I'm okay," Sirius offers.

"Aside from the arm. And the Dark Lord."

"And Galina."

"Her, too."

They smile at one another. Yí'ān stands up and offers him a hand.

"She'll want you back for today," he says. "Much to discuss. We want to talk theories again. And she wants you on comms. That group of dragon egg smugglers in the Baltic Sea pissed off the Estonian magical authorities again and now they're having a trial by naval battle, we need to get some folks together and go break that up before nightfall."

"Seriously?" Sirius asks, staring up at him.

"Yeah, I know. You'd think they know better than to fuck with those guys by now."

"No, I mean the talking," he corrects. "We've talked about pretty much every option."

Yí'ān sighs. "Well, she wants to try putting some of them into action. We can't let you stay out here forever. One of these nights, you'll get regional frostbite all in your toes and they'll fall off and we'll never forgive ourselves." He waves his hand around. "Come on, then."

Sirius takes it.

Yí'ān drops him right back onto the ground.

"I still think," Galina says heavily, "that getting you out of Iceland will help. Perhaps it's the cold."

Yí'ān snorts. "He's developed a central heating system," he says, feet propped up on a radio on the floor. "That's what all the fire is about."

"It's not always fire," Sirius sighs. "And I... I dunno. Maybe? But I don't think so."

"It's a place to start," Galina says, and scribbles something down on the back of her hand. "I can take you out of the country for a night next week."

"Okay. Sure. I might end up blowing up some country," Sirius tries.

"We can deal with that when we come to it," Galina snorts.

"I reckon," Yí'ān says, with the air of somebody who knows what they're doing, "it'll be talking about it that helps."

"Oh, no," groans Sirius. "Galina, he's been at this for weeks."

"Just give the idea a chance, is all I'm saying!"

"I don't want to do that!"

"I think it could help!" Yí'ān exclaims innocently. "You know. Talking about this stuff. Everybody in the world could benefit from a little therapy. Especially you. Uh, no offence."

"So you think it's my... emotional baggage that's making me catch fire every three seconds?" Sirius asks, throwing a hand out for emphasis.

Across the room, the wall clock explodes.

He flinches hard. "Shit!"

Galina sighs, raising her wand to vanish the mess. "I'm inclined to agree that it's an... idea," she says magnanimously. "It's plausible enough. We can try."

"I don't want a therapy session!"

"You might just end up getting one, though," Yí'ān offers. "I think it'd help you greatly. Imagine all the stuff you could blow up. We'd have to do it in a padded cell..."

"I could explode wall cladding," Sirius says haughtily. "If I wanted to."

"I'm sure you could," Galina cuts in. "Okay. Talking, new location... I want to try meditation again. Don't give me that look."

"What are you going to do?" Sirius grumbles, mostly to himself. "Kick me out?"

Galina sighs quite heavily. "You," she says, "will be the death of us."

That evening, after Galina has disappeared to gather a force to storm the Estonian Coast and before Sirius and Yí'ān are due to follow, they sit together at the kitchen table to perform their nightly ritual.

"Day forty-three!" Yí'ān says proudly, scribbling the date across the top of the notebook. "Blimey, doesn't feel like that long."

"I'm still alive," Sirius assents. "Joyous."

"Don't be so dour. It's all in the small victories." Yí'ān clears his throat. "Pain?"

"Six," Sirius shrugs.

Yí'ān writes down, *seven/eight*. "How's the twitching been?"

Sirius raises his right arm, still immobile from the elbow down. His hand jitters around like something possessed, shaking and jerking out against his bandaged forearm. "Going great."

"Worse than usual?"

"A bit."

"Right." He writes down *a bit worse*. "Any improvement in motor skills?"

"Pen?" Sirius asks, gesturing with his shoulder.

Yí'ān hands him the pad and biro, which Sirius takes with his left hand and presses into his right, curling the fingers around it. Then, he tries to write the word *Jamie*.

It comes out a dashed, choppy sort of squiggle, a bit smudged. Then, the pen slips out of his lax hold.

"Ah," Yí'ān sighs, as Sirius looks on, a little devastated. "Wanna try again?"

"I'm good," Sirius mutters. He pushes the pad and pen back at Yí'ān with his left hand. "Fuck."

"Sorry, kid."

"I'm okay." Sirius sniffs. "I... I hope we figure it out soon."

"Me, too. I do, too. You're not yourself anymore," Yí'ān sighs.

Sirius is inclined to disagree. He hasn't been himself since 1973.

The sky is red over Estonia, her waters bright and hot with magic. Galina stands at the hull of their small riverboat, silhouetted against the glow of fire on the horizon with one hand wrangled around the flagpole. Sirius whuffs beside her, three paws on the ground, one hanging lamely at his side, brushing the wood as the vessel sways.

"Hold on tight!" Yí'ān yells from the back of the boat, and with a great burst of fire and spitting steam, they explode onto the waves, cutting across the black ocean towards the fighting.

The smell of salt swells on the briny air. Wind whips through Sirius' fur and he barks into it, wild with it, swaying so hard he thinks he might topple off into the water. Under the waves alongside them, streaks of magic fly across the ocean bed from gunmetal grey launchers dug into the rocks, underlighting the shapes of huge, darting trout and rippling shoals of angelfish in strange deathly blue and brilliant purple.

Up ahead, spires of light dye the sky green and red as ricocheting spells burst into the clouds. The air crackles with the beginnings of a tropical storm. Electric light, multi-coloured like acid rot, jumps through the low-hovering mist, setting the horizon alight like Halloween.

Yí'ān whoops at the back. When Sirius barks up at Galina, she's grinning.

"They'll be okay," she shouts into the wind. "They'd all be dead already if they were shooting to kill. We just need to stop the squabbling."

You would swear the dragons were already there, for all the fire. Sirius has hated magic for the past month and a half, hated it so deeply and fully that it has consumed him. Now, among the thick smoke and the sparks that hover on the air like fireflies, he loves it again. He could marry magic, he thinks gleefully. Not like anybody else is lined up.

Yí'ān steers the boat over the low-rising waves and through a patch of pearly white bioluminescence rippling atop the black water. It's so bright that it reflects upwards in undulating stripes of light against Galina's face.

"This stuff is called 'lendavvesi'!" Yí'ān calls to Sirius, who bounds over to him and bites a hole in trousers. "It's what they use to keep the boats afloat under gravitational charms! Made up of old wand cores, mostly, scraped out by grave robbers, great stuff--"

Sirius barks eagerly, bounding around, claws scrabbling against the wooden deck. There are so many smells and colours. He wants an order. He wants something to chew on. He wants so many things and he doesn't know where to begin.

"Atta boy!" Yí'ān cries, voice bright with laughter.

"Don't excite him too much," Galina shouts over, sounding very amused. "He looks like he's going to wet himself."

Sirius whines indignantly, staggering to a halt against the lip of the boat, then limps around in a circle, chasing his tail. The world spins in a genesis of light and sound around him. Sea spray baptises him as it laps over the sides. There is no such thing as a manor, and he has all his bones; the dog is pleased, and all is well.

"Okay!" Galina calls. Sirius and Yí'ān both snap to attention. The world rattles to a halt around him. "We'll be boarding this one."

She points to a heavy iron fishing vessel up ahead, sitting against the bright sky. More lendavvesi is pooled around its base, making it glow pale like a ghost ship. As they watch, it rocks precariously as it collides with another boat, similarly sized but thinner and meaner, and with a great screech of metal, they lurch apart on the water, creaking and screaming.

Sirius barks at her. Why? the dog shouts. Why? Why? Why?

Galina looks over her shoulder at him. She grins crookedly and pulls out her wand. "Watch and learn," she instructs.

Yí'ān laughs with liberal glee. "Isn't the first time we've been pirates, Private Black. Oh, look down there, through the water-- is that a whale? Blimey."

The huge, dark shape of a lost Atlantic Omura floats atop the maladour of colour below them, so large it could swallow them all whole. It must be miles from home. Sirius snaps his great teeth at it and imagines he could chew god up.

Ahead, Galina whips her wand through the air in a bright, hot spiral, and the atmosphere seems to tighten, and then she hurtles out the edge of that white whip and stabs it into the side of the boat.

"It shouldn't sink it," Yí'ān tells Sirius modestly, as they hurtle towards the blinking black hole along the side of the ship at breakneck speed. "Well, not yet, anyway. Hey boy! Get ready to jump--"

In the nightmare, Remus is yelling at him. Sirius can't really hear what he's saying, which he supposes is a good thing. Probably something about Sirius being a disappointment, or something about dying, or something about James. Most of their arguments brushed perhaps too close to being about all three.

He can see his face, though. Remus is an ugly crier; the first time he cried in front of Sirius, they were both thirteen, bemoaning their shitty love lives and bad relationships with their parents. Sirius had mentioned offhand that he thought he would probably die before OWL year, and Remus had cried, and it had made his whole face go red and screwed up and he'd looked pretty terrible, terrible like a natural disaster. Terrible like something that couldn't be fixed.

When Sirius comes awake, shooting upright with wet sand bunched up in the collar of his sweatshirt, coat knotted around his arms, the ground trembles under him, rocking like a crib. The tide is far in and the tumultuous seismic vibrations churn the ocean into a fury.

"Fuck!" Sirius shouts. He scrambles to his feet. "Fucking stop!" he howls.

The ground ripples up to meet him, throwing him to the ground. Sirius wrestles his fluttering arm tight against his side and rolls with the movement, landing curled against the rocks like seaweed.

He takes a long, deep breath, then lets it out. Then another. *Calm your mind*, Galina had told him, when they first tried meditation. *Calm your mind*.

The ocean roars with fury, waves lashing across the ocean at him.

“Fuck you!” Sirius screams at his own arm, and slams it down into the ground with a crack.

The world goes still again. The ocean falls back into place and the trembling ice sheet stills, echoing still at its core with whatever his uncontrolled power did to it.

“Shit,” Sirius whispers, rolling onto his back. He manhandles his right arm to lie across his chest. It’ll bruise by tonight. Cold wind caresses his face and when he breathes out, it frosts before him.

Footsteps approach across the stones, crunching through black rock. Somebody sits beside him.

“No offense,” Sirius snaps. “But I don’t want to talk about it this time, Yí’ān.”

“Understood.” The reply comes in French.

Sirius sits bolt upright. Claude grins at them, hair a little damp where it hangs around their shoulders. They’ve got a heavy black pack slung over their shoulder and this heavy black jacket, and Sirius’ heart gives that funny little lurch again.

“Claude!” Before he can stop himself, he launches at them, wrapping his working arm tight around their neck.

They let out a delighted roar, messing up his long hair.

“Hello, you,” they tell him. “Heard about you three’s stunt in the Baltic Sea the other night and thought I’d come by to congratulate you.”

Sirius pulls away, beaming. “I thought I wouldn’t see you ‘til I can do hunts again?” he asks. “Yí’ān said you came by the

other night. You didn't stay." He sounds a little like a kid when he says that and can't find it in himself to care.

Claude raises an eyebrow at him. "Missing it, are you?"

"So much."

"Really?"

Sirius nods fervently. "Once I've got my arm and my magic and stuff sorted out, I want to start helping you again," he swears down. "I promise. Especially after all you did with the Trace and everything."

Claude's face slips a little, then. It's the first time Sirius has ever seen them look uncertain of themselves. "According to Galina, it's not been going well?"

"Uh, yeah. Sorta." Sirius raises his mangled arm and flops it around in his lap. "Can't use it past the elbow. She doesn't know what went wrong. And she can't track down Dzintara, either. So... it's not been great."

"And they've got you sleeping on a beach?"

"So I don't end up nuking the city or something," Sirius explains, an ounce of misplaced pride in there. "My magic's been all over the place."

"I could sort of see that." Claude glances at the ocean, seeming to ponder. "That's sort of why I'm here, actually."

"Oh," Sirius says. Despite himself, his traitorous heart soars. "Oh?"

"Galina told me she's got you trying different stuff to fix your little... problem," Claude continues. They wrinkle their

nose. "Mediation and stuff."

"Not all of it's that bad," Sirius admits. "But yeah. Sort of."

"Right." Claude laughs under their breath. "Sounds... fun."

"I hate it."

"I figured." They look at him. "I wanted to offer an alternative."

Sirius freezes. "You do?" he demands.

They put their dark hands up. "Not just yet," they say. "I want you to get through Galina and Yí'ān's ideas first. Properly work at them, too. They both care, let them have it."

"And then?!"

"And if nothing's worked by the time they've exhausted themselves," Claude sighs, "I'll come back and offer a few ideas of my own. How does that sound?"

Sirius can't keep the infectious smile off his face. "Yeah. Yeah, that's amazing. Absolutely. Let's do it."

"Nothing is confirmed yet. For all you know, the meditation's gonna work fine."

Sirius shoves them with his shoulder. Then, he pauses. "Why?"

"Why, what?"

"Why are you doing this? You did it with the cores, too. I can't pay you back enough. Dark Lord's gonna kill me before I can work off a debt."

Yí'ān would have winced at that, and Galina would have shaken her head. Claude just shrugs. "I like you," they say. "I think you've got a lot of potential."

"I'm not that special."

"You've got a price on your head at seventeen."

"Wouldn't call it an achievement," Sirius mutters.

Claude sighs. They lean back to sit against a slab of black stone. "In this line of work," they say, "you don't make many friends who last. Yí'ān's got Galina, and me, and the odd boyfriend or girlfriend or whoever from time to time. Galina's got him, and you. I've got Yí'ān, and some old Durmstrang friends scattered through southern Europe on the run from their own families. Half of us will be dead in ten more years."

"Oh," Sirius murmurs, not quite knowing how to respond to that.

"It's a miracle Galina has survived this long." Claude shrugs their broad shoulders. "All the friends who fought with her during the muggle war are gone. If any of us make it, we'll end up like that. So I make friends where I can."

Sirius furrows his brow. "Is it only that?"

Claude hesitates. "I think," they say delicately, "we're quite similar."

Sirius thinks about their hair, both of them with long, dark tangles, and Claude's makeup. He thinks about the howling dog. He thinks about how out here, nobody has an accent that seems to fit them.

“Yeah,” he agrees, almost a touch too eager. “Yeah. I think we are.”

“So we’ve got an agreement?”

“Absolutely,” Sirius assents.

“Good.” Claude grins, flashing white teeth and dark gums at him. “We’ll have you sorted out in no time, the three of us.”

“I’m so lucky,” Sirius says, meaning for it to come out as a joke.

“Absolutely. You could have ended up with the AnCaps.” Claude pulls themselves to their feet. “Come on. Let’s walk and talk.”

“Okay,” Yí’ān starts, sounding a touch uncomfortable already. “You can start wherever you want. We can pretend not to know each other, if you want.”

Knotted into a tight ball on the sofa, hand twitching beside him, Sirius curls up tighter still. “Why would we do that?”

“I don’t know? To stimulate a real therapy session.”

“You already know half the shit anyway.”

“Well,” Yí’ān sighs exasperatedly. “You’re here to tell me the other half.”

Sirius stares at his cooling cup of tea on the coffee table.

“Did you have anything in particular you wanted to start with?”

Shrugging, he brushes his working hand back through his hair, a sort of nervous tick he inherited from James a few summers ago. "I was in love with my best friend," he says. "Dunno if I ever mentioned that."

"Oh. Uh, no," Yí'ān puts in nervously. "No, you didn't."

"Well I was."

"Did you want to talk about them?"

"It's James," Sirius elaborates. "Jamie. Antlers? He's in Padfoot's Army."

"Ohh. That one."

"Yeah."

Awkward silence falls again. Sirius would rather be back at Grimmauld, he thinks, listening to his mother complain about the blood traitors trying to breed them out with their defiling marriage customs and their effeminacy and their degenerate, non-normative whorishness.

"What's he like?" Yí'ān asks.

Sirius stands up. "Fuck this," he says, and the window across the room shatters into millions of pieces.

Yí'ān guards his face with his notepad. "Sirius, wait--"

Sirius doesn't listen. He storms out.

Therapy was a bust. As Yí'ān sulks and January begins to melt, Galina takes over.

"You've packed your toothbrush?" she asks for the fourth time.

Sirius rolls his eyes. "I've packed my toothbrush," he confirms, very tiredly. "I promise."

"Right." Galina sighs, looking him up and down. Sirius only has a duffel bag. "We can get you a sleeping bag, if you'd like."

"Didn't know you had any left I didn't burn."

She shakes her head. "We don't. But I can get you one."

"Nah." Sirius clears his throat, a lump forming in it. "It... I'm okay."

"Right," Galina says. She offers her arm.

Sirius takes it. With a crack, they dissaparate. The world sinks and compresses down into a tiny black mass around them and Sirius fights to draw in a tight breath. Then, everything expands again.

Sirius and Galina are standing in a green patch of forest, round green trees rising high around them. Evergreens, Sirius thinks. Through a gap in them, the valley they're perched on dips down into a stretch of common, and a little town is speckled across the fields on its other side, orange with the dying sunlight, all white walls and red rooftops. A blue lake bisects the picture, pure and pearly.

"Luthuania," Galina says, dropping Sirius. "In the south."

"Right," Sirius replies faintly, spinning around to take the forest in. There are birds in all the trees, which are thick with heavy sheafs of leaves. "Might be a fire hazard."

"We can deal with that problem when we come to it," Galina promises. "It's beautiful, is it not?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I guess it is."

When Sirius looks at her, Galina has a very whistful look on her face. "My family and I used to come here for winters. Even during the war. The beginning of it, anyway."

"Oh."

"It was nice."

"Yeah," Sirius says, though he can't imagine thinking that anything involving family could be nice. "Yeah. It's beautiful here."

Galina picks her way over a tuft of blue flowers to the treeline, looking over the valley. Mist has just begun to settle over everything, and the orange sky gives way to pale blue on the horizon.

"Yes," she sighs. "It is."

Sirius thinks he understands, now, why she thought this would work. "You can go back, if you want," he offers. "I'll be okay here for the night."

"What will you do?"

"Run around as a dog for a while. Smell the flowers. I dunno." Sirius shrugs jerkily. "I'll get to sleep once it's dark. Don't worry about me."

"We always worry about you." Galina smooths the hair off his forehead with a hand. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

"Course not."

She smiles at him. Then, with a crack, she's gone.

Sirius drops the duffel bag behind a nearby log and shifts. The dog's brain is simpler, emotions less complex. He sets off into the forest, limping and then running and then flying.

By the time morning rises, he's slept three hours and woken every ten minutes, sparking and spitting like a firework. Sirius has managed to keep from setting alight a wildfire, but that's about the length of his achievements for today.

When Galina apparates back in, he's sitting against a tree, head in his hands. The forest is green and grey around him, heavy with settling smog. She stands in front of him silently.

"Didn't work," Sirius tells her tiredly. "I've barely slept at all."

She doesn't speak for a moment. "I see," she says eventually. "Are you alright?"

"As alright as I have been." Sirius gestures with his tweaking arm. "It's still angry with me."

"I see."

"Sorry."

"It's alright," Galina sighs. She walks over and sits opposite him, in the fallen leaves and green moss. Hovering gnats

hang bright on the air, and dawn mourns around them both, biting with cold.

Sirius chews on a strip of loose skin along his nail. He misses the smells of the city sometimes; the smoke, the rust, the stench of concrete dust. The sun always felt brighter in London, harder and sharper like it was trying to dry all of them out.

"I worry that this might have all been a mistake," Galina admits, into the quiet.

Sirius startles. "Taking me in?"

"No. Of course not," she amends. "No. The... I think I might come to regret contacting Dzintara."

"Oh," Sirius says.

"She and I have a long history. She owed me a debt, and after all these years... I suppose I thought there was no better time than to call it in."

"Yeah."

"And I worry that I may have doomed you," Galina admits.

Sirius shrugs, feeling very uncomfortable. He shuffles deeper into his charred, grey sweatshirt. "I think it's the only chance I would've gotten," he points out. "To fight back, and stuff. I would've done it anyway, or something worse. If I don't kill Tom first, he's going to kill my friends and then me, too."

"The things these people are willing to do," Galina sighs. "It never fails to surprise me. Even after all this time."

"I just want this to be over."

Her face softens. "I know," she says. "*Direct Action* is on tonight. We can listen together, if you'd like. I'm not so busy today."

Sirius forces a smile. "I'd like that," he says. "Yeah. Yeah, definitely."

"Good." Galina puts a hand on his shoulder. "We will figure out a way around this. I promise."

"Of course." Sirius remembers, then, sitting up straight and throwing his hand out. "Claude said they would help, too! I should write them a letter..."

"Archeambeau wants to assist?" Galina asks imperiously.

"Yeah! They said they have some ideas," Sirius gushes.

"I see." Looking mildly dubious, Galina nods along anyway. "Then I suppose that's our next action plan. Come, you. Tea is in order."

She and Sirius both stand up. Sirius breathes in the foresty smell of Luthuania one last time, rich and compelling, and then takes Galina's arm, and it's all gone away.

A week later, Claude comes for him in the evening.

Sirius is alone in the apartment, waiting for Galina to get back from a job in Poland so he can trek back to his beach. He's been on comms for three hours and there's a sharp ache between his shoulderblades from bending over. Bad posture is going to kill him one of these days.

When the buzzer at the front door goes off, Sirius is all too eager to take the offered break. He stands and stretches, crossing the apartment to answer.

"Halló? Kovalenko búseta," he says, fumbling still with the Icelandic syllables. He's only learned a little in the time he's been here, and he's no good at it.

"Ég hélt að þú værir breskur," replies Claude's rumbling voice on the other end.

"I dunno what that means," Sirius sighs, fumbling back over to English. He switches to French and curses muggles for having made so many damn languages in the first place. "Come on down, I'll open it now."

"I said, I thought you were English," Claude laughs. "My sincerest thanks."

Sirius buzzes them in. When they step through the door into the apartment, they grin down at him, still so tall they have to stoop to get inside.

"Anybody else here?" they ask. "Or have they left you on guard duty."

"It's just me," Sirius says, some pride in it. "I'm taking care of comms."

"Right. Well, unfortunately, I'm going to have to cut that short."

"Why?"

"I told you I was helping, didn't I?"

Sirius feels a grin stretch across his face. "Galina doesn't trust it, you know."

"Me?"

"Yeah. Thinks you're a bad influence."

"Ha! Well, she's one to talk, is she not? Come on, get dressed, sweatpants won't do. We need to make the most of the cover of night."

Sirius glances out of the high window. "I thought... but it's still light outside?"

Claude rifles through the fridge, pulls out a jar of skyr jógúrt and begins eating it with a teaspoon sitting on the sink. "Not where we're going. Quick quick, now."

Sirius jogs into the living room with no further prompting, throwing on a pair of Yí'ān's dark trousers and a heavy snow jacket with a big hood. He pulls on his boots and double knots them very tight (quite the feat with one hand) and then, for the first time since November, gets up and gives himself a proper look-over in the mirror on the wall.

He looks a mess. Sirius supposes he shouldn't be surprised like that. Ratty hair down his back and heavy, purple shadows around his eyes. The flesh of his cheeks sags into the hollows there more than it used to, and it makes his eyes look too large for his face. He looks a bit wolfish, he fancies, like Moony before the full. Unkempt and pathetic and sort of like he might take a chunk out of you if you got too close. His hand jumps around at his side like it's trying to find something to strangle.

"You should teach me how you do your hair," Sirius tells Claude, when he goes back into the kitchen.

Claude puts the skyr back in the fridge, tossing the teaspoon underarm into the sink. "It's called shampoo."

"I know that," Sirius says, rolling his eyes. "You've got these shorter bits around your face, though."

"I do."

"I want that."

Claude raises an eyebrow. "We can cut it," they say. "After tonight."

"Right."

"Ready to go?"

Sirius nods. "Where are we going?"

"It's a surprise," Claude winks. "We'll be disappearing from the green outside the apartments. Come."

"One sec, actually..." Sirius glances at his hand. "Can you, uh, write a note for Galina? She'll worry. And I can't."

Claude sighs. "Yeah," they say, fishing in their pockets for a scrap of paper.

By the time they make it out of the apartment block, the heavy grey sky has shifted a little. Through a break in the clouds, yellowish sunlight drifts down over Reykjavik, and Sirius stands in the melting grass and looks out over the city for a moment before apparating and thinks, yes, he's been very lucky.

Then, Claude grabs him by the upper arm, and they're gone.

Sirius' feet find purchase on hard ground. He hits the earth and staggers sideways into something hard and cold with the rough landing. A rush of icy air like a vacuum buffets his face. It's dark, fiercely black.

"Don't stumble around too much," Claude warns. "Is your vision better as a dog?"

Sirius finds his feet. "Yeah."

"Transform," Claude commands.

Sirius needs no further incentive. He shifts, feeling his spine malform under his skin, and then he's the canine, shivering in a patch of snow.

The world expands out around him, bright enough to see. Sirius' eyes adjust and he and Claude are standing on the cusp of a narrow pathway, overlooking what he thinks must be the mouth of a volcano, which gapes wide and cavernous below them like the lips of a dark universe. The path spirals down and down into it, a few miles long, into the blackness and out of sight. In the far distance, beyond the top rim of the cavern, red industry lights blink on the horizon.

"Welcome," Claude says, "To Nyurba, Russia. Come, now. I'll explain."

Sirius whuffs his assent, limping through the snow behind Claude as they begin to make their way down the path, into the jaws of the dark beast. There are so many smells. Iron. Humans. Blood. Magic. Heat.

"This is a diamond mine," Claude calls, from up ahead. Their big, boxy shoulders sway against the dark sky as they walk. From down here, they might as well be a giant. "Been

around since '74, when the Soviets got most-favoured-trader status with the US after they relaxed their, uh, emigration policy. Tons of places like this popped up. Mostly North Americans buy this stuff. It's almost entirely foreignly managed."

Sirius barks as quietly as he can. The sound echoes in a long circle around the cavernous walls.

"Yes, I know it's boring. Your Iceland folks would like that I'm educating you, so focus." Claude clambers over a lump of snow-covered machinery and continues. "When stuff like this has foreign management, it's harder for magical authorities to keep an eye on it, especially when you take into account uh, Soviet-American privacy laws. Everything gets hush-hush. Harder for well-intentioned wizards to monitor this stuff, and easier for malevolent ones to misuse it. Which is why we're here."

Sirius nips the back of their leg, stumbling over his dead-weight paw.

"You'll see when we get down there," Claude promises. "It's quite something to encounter."

They continue to spiral down and down into the cavern, around and around in far-flung circles. Claude tells Sirius stories of international conflicts with Chinese wizarding fleets spurred by muggle fighting that took place not far from here, of political unions of war-protesting magical scholars all along the southeast side of Eurasia in the sixties. Sirius listens through a winding tale of court cases and international law evocation when the statute of secrecy was broken to smuggle muggles over the Berlin wall five years ago. His doggy brain doesn't care much. It likes the sound of the words, though.

When they reach the bottom, Claude holds out a hand to stop Sirius and they both halt. The path lets out onto a dark, flat circle of hard-packed earth, fifty feet across, dusty and full of pieces of lead machinery. A dark, cold generator sits in the centre. Heavy, steel pipes lead out into dark voids around the edges, under where the path leads back up.

"Okay," Claude murmurs. "We're going to work our way from pipe to pipe and clear each one out. You listen to everything I tell you to do. Yes?"

Sirius whines his assent.

"Follow me," Claude says.

Sirius pads after them as they stride across the clearing to the very first pipe. It's barely six foot tall, so Claude has to crouch very low to sidle through. Sirius follows them, glancing back at the sky one last time, which seems very, very far away.

There's just something about the underground, he thinks in the human bit of his head, as they slip through the metal pipe and into the blackness. Humans have been flying for a long time (as long as there have been brooms, which must be at least five hundred years), and the sky just feels like it goes up and up forever. Sirius thinks that as scary as heights can be, you can find yourself fifty feet in the air and feel as close to humanity as you ever did, but five feet under the ground can feel like a sort of underworld.

The scents down here, they're setting off the yappy part of his brain. Sirius has to force himself not to bark. Rusty and coppery, like minerals. It smells vaguely like plaster, or something else tacky and made of muggle chemicals. The thick stench of dirt makes him think of the shrieking shack; perhaps this place is haunted, too.

Up ahead, still crouched very low, Claude hasn't stopped moving for a moment yet. But then they pause. Sirius collides with the back of their legs and they don't even wobble.

Both of them stay there for some time, frozen. Sirius strains his ears, trying to catch whatever sound they did, and then he realises it wasn't a sound at all.

The pipe under them is rattling ever so slightly, trembling rhythmically. Like something else is inside of it, just a little further into the darkness.

Very, very slowly, Claude pulls out their wand. Sirius tenses all over. Wind whistles past them both, out into the frigid air.

"Lumos," Claude whispers.

The pipe floods with light. There are a dozen dark things hanging from the ceiling of the tunnel right ahead of them, black against the silvery metal, and all at once they screech and keen and explode open in firey masses of green, swooping at them.

Claude roars, hurtling their wand in a whipping pattern to slash one from the air as their other hand grapples for the knife strapped across their back. Sirius goes careening past them, kicking off the sloped wall, and snaps at one of the flying things, snatching it out of the air with his teeth and tearing at it. He shakes his head back and forth, whipping it against the metal wall. The thing screeches and something in its moth-like skeleton snaps.

Another dives at Sirius and he barks, scrabbling his claws backwards against the floor, which whines under him. The creatures are huge and bird-shaped, with bulbous,

butterflyish bodies and broad green flanks. The webby insides of their wings are bright, pulsating blue, veined with dark lines. They have very sharp teeth and skull-like heads.

The one in Sirius' jaw twitches and falls limp, wings still batting limply at the air. Sirius paws at it and crunches and crunches until he feels its neck break between his teeth, then spits it out and throws himself into the creatures' screaming swarm.

Their glowing green-blue masses twist around him. Bright colours lash against the walls, reflective and stark. Sirius snares one out of the air and wrestles with it; it bites him and he bites it right back, scrabbling his teeth along its skull, trying to crush its stupid little brain. Claws rake along his back and Claude hurls one of the creature's corpses overarm at the wall, where it splits down the middle, leaking black blood over Sirius' fur.

"Go for the neck!" Claude shouts, as Sirius lunges at an injured one, which lies in a heap on the metal floor. "That's it, *je suis si fier de toi, ma tigre!*"

If Sirius was a person, he would be laughing. Instead, he rips another from the air, the last but one left, and hurtles it into the wall, paws and forearms flat to the ground, tail wagging as he whips it left and right in his jaws.

By the time every last creature is dead, they're both panting. Sirius drops his final kill and transforms back, choking out a mouthful of black blood.

"Holy fuck!" he yells, so loud that it echoes around them half a dozen times. "What the fuck!"

"Those," Claude pants, kicking the last of them off him. It skittles into the pile with the rest of them, twitching and

then going still. "Those are Swooping Evils. Nasty buggers with very potent blood. Plus, you can grind up their bones for tons of different healing potions. Somebody's been breeding them here."

"Breeding them-- how do the muggles not know?" Sirius asks.

"Muggles can't see 'em," Claude explains, gasping. "Few of them have died, but mining accidents and deaths aren't uncommon. Most of it goes uninvestigated."

"That's awful," Sirius says. He sits down in the centre of the tunnel, wiping blood off his shirt.

"Are you hurt?" Claude asks, sort of an afterthought.

"Little bit. One of them got me." Sirius takes stock of the bite in his ribs, scorching with bright pain. "It's nothing major."

"Alright," Claude agrees, without asking to check for themself. They stomp across the metal with resolve and kneel in front of him. "For this next tunnel," they say, looking into his eyes, "I want you to stay human. Alright?"

"Huh?" Sirius asks. "Why?"

"I brought you here for a reason, didn't I?" Claude replies, slipping into the rhetorical. They take Sirius' arm and poke none-too-gently at the bandages there. "I want you to use this and try to fight with it."

Sirius stares. "But... but Galina said..."

"I know what she said," Claude entertains, sounding mildly exasperated. "Trust me. And I get why she thinks it. But I

think we'd do well to cater to your strengths here."

"What strengths?"

Claude smiles at him. "You're angry," they say. "And you want to break stuff. Maybe that's what'll get it under control."

"Oh."

"I think it's worth a try."

Sirius considers that, thinking it over. He glances from Claude's face to the piles of dead Swooping Evils on the pipe floor. The rusty smell of metals and minerals tickles his nose and he wants to sneeze.

"Okay," he agrees eventually. "I think... I'll give it a shot."

Claude stands, still crouched over. "Help me bag these up," they instruct. "It'll be lots of journeys up and down the mineshaft by the time we're done. We can dump them at the bottom of the pit for now."

Sirius stands up too, taking a black binbag and stuffing the crumpled bodies of the Evils inside one-handed. They work in comfortable silence. His right arm throbs rhythmically. When they're done, they drag the bags out of the tunnel behind them, leaving them in a patch of sparse moonlight beside the generator, and then they begin the trek into the following tunnel.

Through the silent walk, Sirius does his best to steel himself for the challenge. His arm throbs hard enough that it feels like heat is gathering there, as if it can tense the fear in him. He wrangles it up into his other hand, holding it out in front of him like a weapon.

Ahead, Claude doesn't speak. The darkness closes in around them, claustrophobic and pitchy. They might as well be close to hell, this far down.

Unbidden, Sirius remembers a story Remus told him about his Bampi back in Wales, who was a miner his whole life, in the Big Pit in Blaenavon (*bly-nav-on*, Sirius remembers, even today). Remus had described the consuming darkness of it to Sirius so well it was as if he'd been there himself, he remembers, the day before one Christmas break when they were both due to go home. Remus reckoned he would've ended up mining if he was a muggle, he told Sirius. Travelling down a mile into the earth each morning and working among the black rumblings of a shifting planet.

That ordinary swell of longing, which has been growing like a tumor in Sirius for years now, catches alight. It feels as though it could keep growing forever.

"Lumos," Claude says, up ahead, and Sirius burns.

Light floods the tunnel like deliverance. Something in him snaps and Sirius shoves past Claude and hurtles into the midst of the Evils, who screech and come apart around him. One of them launches at his face, screeching and swooping with its gaunt bony jaws opening to maul him.

Sirius raises his arm -- his right arm -- and a ripple of power explodes from his fingertips like static electricity, pure kinetic energy, so fierce that it throws him back against the iron wall. The Evil screeches, launched so hard in the opposite direction that its wings tear off and it hits the metal and slides down the curved side of the pipe to the ground, where it lands in a puddle of its own black blood, dead.

"Fuck!" Sirius shouts. "Yes! Yes!"

An Evil dives at him out of the darkness, stabbing its claws into his shoulder and screeching into his ear. Sirius is so full of rage then, and it explodes from him as if it was always supposed to; the Evil catches alight, fire rippling over its skin, and pressure explodes through the air as if from a trapped nerve. Everything rattles. The walls, the floor, Sirius' own bones.

He is a frenzy, a wildfire -- Sirius raises his hand and blasts pure heat another of the beasts, hurtling it out into the blackness in a streak, then reaches out to grab a fourth from the air with his hand around the throat, squeezing. As he watches, red light blossoms under its veined skin like a spell, glowing against the reflective walls in tones of purple and gold. It screeches with pain and then falls still, corpse so hot it's smoking.

Sirius drops it, spinning around to find another thing to kill -- there are two more, but they're crumpled on the floor of the tunnel, mangled, and the walls are scorched, he realises faintly, strips of rusted metal curling away from the walls like tree roots in burnt masses.

Kneeling across from him, holding their lit wand tight, Claude meets his eyes.

"They're all down," they say, half-cautious. "You with me, Sirius?"

"Yeah," Sirius breathes. He stares down at the Evils bled out on the floor, then at his own hand. Experimentally, he flexes it.

White light throbs under the skin, flying through his veins. As Sirius watches, it pulses, speckles of brightness like dying stars pimpling over the top of his wrist, glowing

through the bandages. He isn't a person anymore, Sirius registers. People don't normally do that sort of shit.

"Jesus Christ," Claude lets out. "Come here. You're injured."

Sirius staggers to them, sitting. He hadn't realised he was hurt, but Claude grabs him by the back of the neck and wipes his face, under the eyes, sleeve coming away bloody.

"I dunno what that was," Sirius mutters. He can't stop flexing and unflexing his hand in his lap. He tries to cross his fingers and it doesn't work. Maybe he needs to build up to that. But he can move it again. He can actually move it.

"You got very angry," Claude recounts simply. "I think that's what you needed."

"Anger's bad for you, my friend always said." James. James, without a temper. James, with parents who cared. Perhaps anger and grief are the same thing, really.

Claude nods. "The blood vessels under your eyes burst through the skin," they tell him. "You look like hell."

"Again," Sirius pleads. "Please. Let me do it again."

"I shouldn't," they say, but then they stand up and offer him a hand. "But I will."

Sirius stumbles to his feet. His hand crackles with power, too hot to touch. Frigid Russian wind rushes through the tunnel and casts his hair into a tempest around him, stirred into tangles.

"Nothing's going to be the same again, is it?" he asks Claude, as he watches them bag up the bodies of the Evils.

Claude shakes their head, not looking at him. "Nothing's going to be the same again," they confirm. "Nothing at all."

Chapter End Notes

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JAMIE

Chapter Notes

oh boy! oh boy. here we go

twos: some real big sad

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Sirius,

I suppose I should explain why I did it. I'm not sure I can, though, so that might not be the best idea.

Maybe I should start here: I remember how you looked when you saw James for the first time. I didn't know your name yet, and James had only just introduced himself to me. I knew that he was probably well-off, and English, and I was already feeling awkward, and then you walked in with those stupid velvet dress robes hanging around you, and you two looked at each other and recognised each other, probably from some pureblood thing or something. And he said hi and you said hi and after that, he'd forgotten my name, and I had to say it again, but he didn't forget you, not anything about you.

I tried to convince you of that a bunch of times. We both loved him, after all, for a long while. Think it's what pushed us together, in the end. You were sure he was straight and I was sure he'd only ever love you, and when you kissed me, I think you imagined I was him, and when you were gone, and he was the one kissing me, I think he was imagining I was you. I've been in the middle like that for a while. Guess it was inevitable.

And I'll concede this: he loves me. Or a bit of him does. He's a shit liar, you know? And I think he's going to hate it when I'm dead. Or gone or whatever. I don't want to hurt him -- it kills me to think I might -- but then I think about the way he looked when he saw you, and I think he might be alright.

Anyway. I've had a bad week, can you tell? Christmas was miserable, and New Years worse, and work's been shit, too, really busy. Customers get mean over the holiday period. Funny how that happens. I've been all morbid and mopey and I think Lily's worried about me, as much as she's worried about James, anyway. Marlene screamed at him at the breakfast table the other day when he mentioned Peter. I think they're going to tear each other's heads off.

Who am I to complain, I suppose? We've got Direct Action. We've got music, and the radio, and food. We've got another two months. Until I come of age, I mean. We can make that work, right? We can stretch it.

Between you and I, I'm scared of going back home. Really scared. Not because I think I might die, but because I'm worried I might bring the war to the Vale of Glamorgan, to Porthcawl and Southerndown and Bridgend Train Station, and Blaenavon, and Merthyr, and all the shitty places I grew up. I can't do that to South Wales. I wouldn't be able to forgive myself.

I guess I might see my mother again. That's good news, right? I don't know if she blames me for her marriage falling apart, or herself for marrying into this mess in the first place. I might ask her. I wonder a lot what she'd say. She's like James; she can't lie, not like you and I can.

Stay safe. God knows what's going to happen now that I've fucked everything up.

Remus.

James doesn't speak to him for a week.

Remus responds to this by sleeping in the nook of the kitchen window (which is extraordinarily uncomfortable), talking very little, and making lots of tea. He figures if he sleeps in the same bed as James, he'll mess something up between them, if messing things up more is even possible. Lily drifts between them both until she seems to get tired of asking what's happened and stops, retreating into herself. The three of them spend that week, for the most part, not talking to each other one bit. It suits them just fine.

"It just doesn't seem that time-sensitive to me," Lily tells him, the morning she finally tries to approach him again. It's ten days into January, and 1977 is shaping up to be lonely enough to kill.

"Yeah?" Remus asks tiredly, siphoning through their latest pile of letters.

"I think we could afford to stay here for at least a few months after we come of age," she elaborates. "All of us. You know. We could stay here until the summer."

"Sure."

"And we could take people in, when the school year ends. The ones who don't want to go back. We can offer them a place to be."

"Right," Remus says absently, not looking up.

He hears Lily sigh heavily. "I know I can't convince you. I just wish I could understand it."

Remus glances at her. She stares steadily right on back at him. They stay like that for a moment.

"I don't know," Remus sighs eventually, with an amount of finality to it. "I don't think I get it either."

"Then you can still change your mind."

He shakes his head resolutely. "I need to be useful," he says, though that's not the full extent of it. "I need to help somehow."

"You're helping here, Remus."

Remus shakes his head. "You know this won't last," he tells her.

Lily sits down in the seat beside him. She doesn't speak for a while. When Remus looks at her, she's got her face turned out towards the window, sunlight streaking across her pale cheek. He doesn't initiate conversation. She can take the reins, if she wants. Anything to get some sense of control back. If anybody needs it, he thinks, shuffling the sharp thin edge of a paper knife along the inside of the next letter, it's her.

"I guess," she assents, after some time. "I guess I've known it for a bit. James doesn't think that, though."

"James is wrong about a lot of things," Remus says fondly.

"Yeah," Lily agrees, less so.

"He'll be alright," Remus tries to justify. "Without me around. Even if you left, he'd be okay. He's going to spend the rest of his life trying to find Sirius, if he has to."

"And you're not?"

"Of course I am. I'd go anywhere. But it's different."

"Different how?"

"Different like things will..." Remus trails off. "I dunno."

"I don't pretend to understand it," sighs Lily. "I just... from what I can see, you all love each other the same."

"I guess."

"He wants you here. It's killing him, thinking of doing it alone."

"Well, he won't be alone," Remus blurts out, a little snappishly now. "He's got you."

"I don't... Remus, I don't know how much longer he will."

Remus stares. "You're not going to die," he says, a little stupidly.

"Of course not," Lily justifies, not seeming to mean it. "I didn't... that's not what I meant. I meant there's things I feel like I need to do, too."

"Like?"

Lily chews her lip. "I don't know," she sighs. "I'll figure something out. I can't talk about any of it yet."

"Okay."

"Remember, in... in October," she tries. "When we first met the Friends, and they told us about... a sanctuary? Some people are building it overseas. For... for people like me. Muggleborns."

Remus hesitates. "I remember," he agrees softly, though he doesn't.

"I've been thinking." Lily shrugs. "But nothing's set in stone yet. So all I'm asking is that you give it time. I won't be around forever. We can't leave him on his own."

Remus imagines, for a fleeting moment, how James might fare alone. He wouldn't make it a week. "Yeah," he sighs. "Yeah, we'll... we'll figure something out."

But even then, he already knows his mind is made up. He can't go back on this, not now. Not when the war is stretching its clawed fingers so close to home, and one of these days, it's going to strangle it."

Lily takes his hand in her own. Remus has shit circulation so his fingers are always blue, and hers are smaller and freckled, the veins further from the surface. She rubs her thumb over his.

"We're all going to be okay," she promises. "I know we are."

"Yeah," Remus chokes through a dry throat. "Of course."

"Do you trust me?"

Remus can't remember trusting anyone, really. "Yeah. Of course."

"Good," Lily sighs. "Then trust me with this." And she lets go.

James is off on a delivery to Derbyshire and Mary's asleep. Even then, Remus thinks, sinking into his seat and flicking the pen knife open and closed, the walls feel like they're leaning in close to listen. To watch, and to learn.

When James returns later that day, he doesn't say a word to Remus as he potters around the kitchen, filling the kettle and clanking it with an angry clatter atop its base. Remus keeps his head down and pretends to read the letter in front of him, eyes not really seeing it. Neither of them bucks up the courage to speak. It's been like this for a while. James cried the whole first night after the full at New Year's, Remus remembers. The sound of it was awful. Lily got up and left for a walk in the middle of the night to avoid it, and didn't come back until the morning.

It feels like whatever was mooring them, it was fragile; Remus is sure it's him that has sent them all spinning off at an angle, out of orbit, and surely none of this is salvageable, not now that he's pulled apart the thing that was keeping them all from shaking into pieces. It was companionship, perhaps, a veneer that made the war feel like it wasn't there. But last week, three Order members died on a mission, and the bodies are too mangled to bury in one piece, and it feels like the smoke and mirrors have stopped working.

That evening, Remus makes dinner in silence and the three of them eat it without looking at each other. It's only heated-up Chinese takeaway, from the place down the road. It's good, in the way a chocolate bar is good when you find it at the bottom of your bag after six months. A sort of best-you-can-hope-for good. Outside, the grey sky sits over them

all, lashing with thick rain, blurring it against the London skyline.

After a while, James speaks up. "The dementors are in Ashbourne."

Lily looks up from her cheung fun noodles. "What?"

"They've moved south from Litton and Longstone," James nods. He skewers his fork through a chunk of sweet and sour chicken and chews angrily.

"Did you see them?" Remus asks, the first thing he's tried to say to James in days.

James glances at him. Their eyes meet for an electric moment. "Yeah," he says.

"Are you okay?"

He shrugs. "I got out of there."

Remus gets up. He rifles in the back of the food cupboard until his hand closes around the last of their Dairy Milk chocolate, only two lines of it left, wrapped in its purple plastic shell and shoved out of view. He takes it back to the table and breaks all the chunks off into individual squares one by one, until they sit in a pile in the middle of the white-sided plastic. Then, he pushes it at James.

James shakes his head. "I'm okay."

"It'll make you feel better."

He shrugs. "You don't need to be nice to me, Remus."

"I do," Remus says, and hopes it'll convey everything he can't bring himself to say out loud.

Sighing, James takes a piece of chocolate and crunches down on it. Remus watches some of the lines of tension in his face soften. Under the warm glow of the ceiling lights, he looks a little less like a ghost.

"You look healthier already," Lily exclaims, ever the optimist. "Were... were there a lot of them?"

"Handful," James nods. "They're looking for him."

"There were two on the rooftop of Grimmauld Place last week," Remus mentions offhand. Neither James nor Lily asks him why he was passing Sirius' old house. It's not necessary.

"I'll ask one of the Order members if there's something we can do about it," Lily offers. "Since we can't exactly cast patroni..."

James is the only one of the three of them who is able to, and even he's only succeeded once. And a lot of good that does them with the Trace on them.

"Moody will rip our heads off if he knows I've been breaking house arrest," James protests, taking another chunk of chocolate and breaking it between his back teeth.

"He'll rip our head off for anything," Remus mutters. James ignores him.

"I'll mask the question somehow," Lily sighs, brushing them off. "I... well, listen. Since you two are talking again..."

"Who said we're talking again?" James asks quickly.

Remus stares at the tabletop, burning with guilt and perhaps anger, he's not sure.

Lily sighs very tiredly. "Can you try, James? Can you just try?"

James shrugs. "I'm not the one--"

"I know," she cuts over him. They have a long, silent conversation, mostly glares. Remus stares out at the rain, at the golden lights of other windows, at the soft glow of other lives as they ripple atop the river.

"Fine," James says, and breaks the magic. He nudges Remus' leg under the table with a socked toe. "We can talk again."

"I'm sorry," Remus lets out, before he can think of anything that might be more appropriate to say. "I am."

Acknowledging it makes it all a little worse. Taking stock of the fact that he's fucked up and done something wrong and refuses to take it back.

"I know you are," James replies promptly. "You can change your mind."

"But I won't."

James frowns darkly at him. "Then apologising doesn't mean anything."

"It's not like I have a choice," Remus says. He tries to inject some passion into that, but it comes out very tiredly, like no amount of sleep can fix him. "You know what's going on in Wales. With people like me."

Lily coughs, staring at the table.

"I know," James snaps. "But you know what's going on with me. With him. Him, Remus. Isn't it enough to stay for him?"

"If either of us is going to find him, it'll be you. There's nothing you wouldn't do."

"And then I guess I was stupid for thinking you felt the same way."

"Of course I do. But it's different."

"Different how?"

"I don't want to talk about this."

"I do!"

"Can we please just make up?" Remus pleads. "We've got two months. I can't go two months without talking to you. I can't. It's... I just can't."

"But you can go off to Wales without me?"

"It's not about you!"

"Then who is it about?"

"Him!" Remus exclaims. "Of course it's about him. It's always about him."

James rubs his face with both hands. "I'm going to bed," he says shortly, standing up. "Thanks for the chocolate." And he sweeps a hand across the table and knocks it onto the floor, and chunks of milk chocolate go skittering across the floor all over the place.

"James!" Lily gasps.

James storms out, slamming the door behind him. Lily gets up and goes after him. Remus sits at the table, feeling very cold on the inside, buzzing with some unknown, untempered energy which lashes hot fingers around his throat and squeezes. He hears his heartbeat rushing in his ears.

"Fuck," Remus says into the quiet. "Fuck."

James, Remus,

Hope you're both doing okay. Sorry I haven't written over Christmas. Did it go okay for you both? Hope you got presents. Didn't send anything. They don't let us do Hogsmede visits anymore.

Anyway, in your last letter, you asked what things are like here. Honestly, it's hard to describe. Lots of people get in trouble a lot. Detentions are worse than they used to be, and the teachers are meaner, but as long as you keep your head down, you survive just fine. Sometimes I think people get punished for stuff they didn't need to do. I don't know why they don't just keep to themselves. That's what I've been doing, and I've been okay.

The Gryffindor boys are saying there's rumours about rebel groups working against you-know-who. More of them, I mean. Like it's growing. Is that true? If it is, they should be careful. He's powerful, and there's been stuff in the papers about... people taking it too far, too. It said in the Prophet the other day that a group of you lot murdered a witch in Dublin the other day. Is that true? A bunch of people thought it was made up, but they can't just make stuff like that up. It's the news. They can't just say something happened when it didn't. People would complain.

Or maybe I'm wrong. I don't know. It's hard to know what to believe these days. Dorcas Meadows and I have been talking a lot recently. She's convinced they've cut her out of classes because of all of this political stuff. I think she might be right about that, but I don't know. I guess I don't know much about anything right now. I just want to stay out of it. Make it through school and... I dunno. The four (three?) of us can figure it all out then.

I'm sorry I've been a bad friend for the past while. I know I'm not good at this stuff. And you're both out there being brave and I'm just not. Sometimes they say stuff about werewolves and half-breeds and stuff, and I try to argue, but I just can't. I'm not brave like that. But I do my best.

Anyway. Sorry this one's been long, mates. Don't write back too soon, okay? I... I worry. Stay safe and stuff. Send Honeydukes, if you can! Are you guys still able to shop at Diagon Alley?

Cheers,

Peter.

"Come on, then," Lily tells them both at the breakfast table the following morning. Her face is still puffy and red from the night before.

"Come on, then?" James asks, mildly confused.

"We're going out," Lily exclaims. Like it's that easy.

Remus glances at James, as if to exchange looks. Studiously, James ignores him.

"Where?" Remus asks, after moment of confused hesitation.

"You'll know when we get there."

James sighs. "Can I finish breakfast first?"

"Be quick," Lily sighs. "Though, the blueberry wheats you got were really good, Remus."

"Thanks," Remus mumbles. "They're popular with customers."

As if realising that they were one of Remus' purchases, James lets his spoon clatter down into the bowl of cereal and pushes it away with a grimace. "I'll get my shoes on."

"Okay," Lily sighs. "I'll bring yours out here, Remus."

They all put their shoes and coats on in silence. It's uncharacteristically cold for winter, Remus thinks, looking at the thick frost on the window. Cold, icy mornings aren't unusual, but the Thames looks almost frozen over, and Lambeth is flooded with bundled-up strangers, scarves pulled over their mouths and hats so low it's a wonder they can see. It must be bitter out there.

James takes the thickest coat. Remus sighs and resigns himself to wearing two sweatshirts and his canvas jacket, and then the three of them shuffle out into the grey, James in sunglasses and a muffler to hide his face. Lily stands resolutely between them both.

"We're not going far," she explains. "We don't need the metro. This way." She heads east down the river.

Remus follows her with long strides, determined not to fall behind, lest James find something else to be angry at him about. They walk in quiet, none of them quite ready to speak. Muggles shove past on either side, heads bowed against the bitter cold. Remus' nose has gone red with it, he knows without having to look. James has his arms tucked around his midriff, shivering. Lily, the sturdiest of them, looks relatively unfazed.

"Not long 'til Marlene's gone," James says after a while, as snow begins to drift down in thin swirls.

Lily nods. There's a look on her face like she's determined to allow absolutely nothing to phase her. "Soon," she agrees levelly. "End of the month."

"It should be a few days before the next moon," Remus agrees faintly.

For a moment, he thinks James is going to tell him he'll have to do it on his own. But evidently, James isn't quite at that point (and thank god; Remus doesn't think he could break again, not like that, not now), because he says nothing, just nods once.

A cafe across the river is opening up. Remus watches its red awning shuffle out over the glass windows, blinking across the street at them like some large eye. A gaggle of muggle teens sit on the railing over the water, laughing and smoking.

"I don't know what Mary's going to do," Lily sighs. "Once this is..." She stops herself, glancing askance at James.

James doesn't reply for a while. Then, he says, "Yeah. I dunno."

"We got another letter from Peter last night," Remus puts in, just to change the subject back to something familiar. "He says things are still bad at Hogwarts. Wanted us to send Honeydukes, bless his heart."

Lily laughs, sounding ill. "Ha."

"He sounds in high enough spirits," James agrees. The first thing he's agreed with Remus on in what feels like years. "I think he's surviving okay. Hate to think of him there alone. He was always the softest of us."

And isn't that right? If any of them could have been called brave, it was Sirius, but James has got a streak of it in him that runs as wide and free as a river, and Remus likes to think he can be brave when he needs to be. But Peter's not like them. Perhaps that's a cruel thought. Many things are cruel.

"I think about Dorcas a lot, still," Lily sighs. "She wrote again, the other day. A letter for me and a letter for Mary and Marlene. She's surviving."

"Pete mentioned her." Remus decides not to elaborate beyond that.

"She's so brave," Lily sighs. "I wonder sometimes what it must be like. I could never do what she's doing."

"Of course you could," James says, quite roughly. "You're... of course you could."

Lily glances away from him. Awkward silence falls once more.

By the time they've arrived at their destination, snow is falling in earnest. Lily fishes the key out from around James'

neck, hand fumbling around his collar in the cold. Remus stares.

"The PO box?" James asks, confused.

Lily wrangles the chain over his head and unlocks their locker with fumbling hands. Inside, it's empty.

"Delivery's not for another day?" Remus reminds, gently.

"I know that," Lily says, annoyed. Then, she reaches inside of her jacket and pulls something out, showing it to them both.

It's a small, glass jar with a paper towel strapped across the top, held in place with a rubber band. Inside, a few leaves are scattered, and there are a handful of insects inside; woodlice, a beetle, a few snails. There's a note taped to the side which reads, 'whoever picks this up: check if any of the insects are still alive, and attach a note with the next outgoing delivery informing us of such. cheers! PA'.

"Huh," James says, staring.

"That could work," Remus mutters, thinking it over in his head. "You're sure they'll all stay alive for another day anyway, though? If they all die in the locker before the delivery, we won't be able to tell anyway."

"I think it'll work," Lily nods. "They've got oxygen and food. Most of them should still be alive this time tomorrow. It's whether the journey will kill them off."

"Right."

"I used to keep little terrariums with my sister when we were kids," Lily continues whistfully. "We used to keep them

on the windowsill in our room. We shared a room, you know." She coughs into her hand. "Sorry."

"It's okay." Remus glances at James, who looks back at him this time. They look away from each other bare moments later.

Lily puts the jar gently inside the PO box, along with a handful of ingoing mail. "Parents, mostly," she says. "I stayed up last night to sort it."

"I was gonna do that," James grumbles.

"Well, now you don't have to," Lily replies smartly. She stares at the jar for another moment or two, then seems to force herself to close to the door. "That's done, then."

"Why did you need us here?" James asks, not unkindly.

Lily turns back to look at them both. "Moral support," she says. "If that's something we still do, the three of us."

Remus aches with guilt. "Hope it helped."

"It did," she reassures, quite sadly. "Come on. Let's go home."

They trek back through the snow in silence. London has gone quiet with the end of the morning rush, and as the flurry gets thicker, Lambeth turns white and still around them, rooftops filling up with pearly speckles of silver which gather in the black drainpipes and over the ridges of the red bricks.

Remus half expects James to take his hand on the way back. Perhaps it's wishful thinking, because James does nothing of the sort; but he does let Remus into the apartment before

him when they get back, which Remus decides he's going to take as a win.

Every few days, a member of the Friends comes over with food and the like. They seem to know that James, Lily and Remus are just fine to source their own food, because the supplies themselves never seem to mean much; it's a lot more about the conversation.

That night, it's Gambit, who shuffles through their front door with her arms laden with Tesco shopping bags.

"I got more of that instant coffee you said you lot liked," she huffs, handing a bag to Remus. "Thanks, love. Those steps outside are murder."

"Better than living on the ground floor," James says, taking the other bag. "We're about to have dinner. Do you want to stay?"

"That'd be lovely," Gambit grins. And just like that, they have a guest.

"How have Order meetings been?" Lily asks, once food has been served. She hasn't even taken a bite of their oven-heated Tesco spinach rigatoni yet.

Gambit looks between each of them and sighs. "They're very conflicted about you lot," they say.

"They are?" James asks.

"Well. There's a sharp divide in opinions of you."

"How?"

Gambit cuts a slice of rigatoni and chews. "There's the one side of it," she explains, swallowing. "Which is that you're all kids, and involving kids in this is like using child soldiers, and we just can't allow it. Which I think a lot of people who still have a moderate grip on their morals like to think."

"We're not children," James says irritably.

"Maybe you aren't, but that's how it is on paper," Gambit sighs. "The other side is... a bit more opportunistic."

"How so?" Lily asks.

"It's Moody and the like, and most of us, too. Lyric, especially." Gambit glances between each of them, taking in their faces. "Right," she says. "I don't want to inflate any egos here, so take what I'm saying as objective, and not as any sort of praise, alright?"

"Alright," James agrees dubiously.

"Well." She raises a hand to tick off fingers. "It was your tip that got a dozen captured Order members out of Rosier Manor in the first place, and Lily's potions which made sure we got out mostly unscathed. All of you together have put this delivery service into action, which feeds us vital information that's helped us save lives. Not to mention the morale boost that's come with the whole business with Black. People tune in half of the time just to hear news about the kid. Gives us lots of audience engagement," she laughs, sort of bitterly.

"Oh," James says. "But... Moody?"

"As much as he distrusts us all," Gambit replies dryly, "I think he's far more concerned with making the most of a bad situation. I don't think it makes his old heart ache to

think of putting kids in danger. When you've been fighting as long as he has, I think you learn how to put your sentiments away."

"He hates us, though."

"He hates everyone," Gambit counters.

"Suppose you're right there," James agrees reluctantly.

Remus turns that over in his mind. "Have they..." he hesitates. "Have they mentioned anything about my...?"

"Your condition?" Gambit asks.

"Yeah."

She sighs very heavily. "Suppose they have," she admits. "From time to time. Honestly, it's, uh... it's been a topic of debate for a bit. Since most of them think we shouldn't trust you."

"I see," Remus says, voice coming out small.

"Not all of us feel that way," she's quick to reassure. "You know, it's not everyone. But some people..."

"I'm planning on making myself useful," Remus cuts in, looking up. "Once I'm of age."

"Oh, yeah?"

He nods. "I'll talk to Moody about it, then. If he's not going to complain about my safety."

"Remus," James hisses.

"There's a pack in South Wales," Remus explains to Gambit, ignoring James entirely. He can have a taste of his own medicine. "Where I'm from. And Voldemort's trying to hurt them."

Gambit flinches at the name. "How do you know?"

"Shacklebolt. This was where he porkeyed to, the night of the raid."

"Oh."

"I have to help," Remus pleads. His voice sounds sort of manic in the quiet of the room. "If I don't do anything, Voldemort might get them on side, or... or he might kill them. Or worse. And it has to be me. You don't have any other werewolves on side. I know you don't."

Gambit stares at him. "You've been thinking about this for a while."

Remus has been thinking about it since their very first meeting with the Order, in October when the world was less cruel and it was warmer. "Yeah."

She carries on watching him, but not for too long before she nods. "I can mention it at the next meeting."

James springs from his seat. "No!" he shouts, loud enough that the neighbours can probably hear it.

And Remus jumps up too. "You do not get to make this decision for me!"

"Yes, I do!"

"This isn't school anymore! The world doesn't revolve around you, James!"

James grapples a handful of his jumper. Remus lashes a hand out to wrap a fist into the front of James' shirt and they topple against the countertop, lashing at each other and fighting like schoolboys. Remus digs his knuckles into James' eye and James jabs him in the ribs with one his bony knees. They hurl insults at each other that Remus won't remember later.

And just as quickly, Lily barges between them, pushing James off Remus. "NO!" she shouts. Then, quieter, more outraged. "*No!*"

"I won't let you throw your life away," James snaps at Remus, over Lily's head. "I'm not a bad fucking person for not wanting you dead."

"This is a war! You're the one always going on about how it's a war, how we're meant to be fighting! You can't only care about him!"

"Don't act like you're any better!"

"At least I'm trying to save my dogshit country," Remus stews, throwing out words not, not together enough to care what they mean. "At least I'm trying, James, to do the right thing because I think it'll help people, not just because I think it'll get him back--"

"You told me--" James shoves past Lily and stabs a finger into the middle of Remus' chest, hard. "You told me you were doing it because you thought he needed me more. You told me you were doing it because-- because some bullshit about how it should be me that finds him. Don't act like this is fucking-- fucking, selfless, Remus. Don't try."

"And what if he does love you more? I can't keep sitting around and waiting for-- waiting for you to find him so things can go back to the way they were, and it'll be you two and I'll-- I'll--" And Remus cuts himself off. "Something needs me more than either of you does right now," he finishes, suddenly exhausted. "And you know all about the shit Sirius grew up with, but you don't know a fucking thing about me. You want me to describe it to you? At least he had fucking money, James."

As soon as he's said it, he knows he doesn't mean it. The words come out and Remus is disgusted with himself the moment they're hanging in the room. He can be as angry at James as he likes. Sirius' childhood shouldn't have anything to do with it, he knows.

James stares at him. "Take that back."

"No." And Remus shoves him hard, watches him go stumbling over into the dishwasher.

"You can't--"

"I can," Remus snaps. He turns around and storms out, out of the front door, slamming it behind him, and then down, down, down the steps and into the city.

Sirius,

I'm writing this in pencil on the blank side of a map of the London underground I pilfered out of a gutter, so don't expect poetics. There's just stuff I need to say that I don't think I can say to James, not right now. I think I need to write it down and know you'll see it. So just let me have this.

I said some things I didn't mean and now I'm sitting near Grimmauld Place again. Not close enough to see the dementors over your house, though I can feel them, so maybe that's why I feel like shit. I can't stop imagining how you'd look if you heard that stuff, how your face would change. I can't stop... thinking about it.

So I'm sorry. I'm not writing it down, and when you read this, do me a favour and don't ask James what it is I said. I don't... it was selfish and wrong. And awful. But I want to go back there and say it to him again. I think there's been this loud angry vile thing growing inside me for a long time and I'm so fucking scared of it, Sirius, and I don't want to go. I don't want to go back. But I have to. I don't know why, but I have to.

I keep trying to work it out in my head and you know what I think it is? It's snowing all over my fucking map. Fuck. You know what it is. It's that I want to save someone. I've always wanted it. It's what I'm made for. Maybe it's just so I can make the wolf angry, or maybe he wants to love something too. I dunno. But I want to save someone, and I can't save him, and I certainly can't save you, Sirius, so that's the bare truth of it; I'm so scared he'll get you back and then I'll lose everything that I'm going to lose everything first if it's the last thing I do. On my own terms.

It's so cold out here, Christ alive. Oer iawn. My Welsh is crap. I used to pretend it was good in front of you and in reality all I was saying was nonsense. I know the alphabet and all the colours, and head shoulders knees and toes, and I know all the pub songs and Calon Lan, and Gwlad, and all that shit, and fuck, I miss you so much, I think I'd give up any language or anything or whatever to get you out of Europe and back to the coast where things are quieter.

Even if it was only to look at you. I think I've forgotten the way your face looks.

I don't know what I'm saying. I have to go back soon, or Lily's going to get worried and James is going to get angry (and I've never seen him like this. He doesn't GET angry. But he yelled, actually yelled and grabbed me and stuff.) and I dunno. I. fuck. Fucking. I don't know.

I'm going to go home soon I promise. I don't know why I'm telling you. You're not fucking here. You can't hear me and I can write all the shit I want and you still won't, and I don't think you'd ever sit down and read this even if you did come back, you know that? You selfish bloody bastard. You utter bitch. I think you wouldn't stop to read it and I think I wouldn't even care. I think you could grab me and say Remus I think I want you to keep caring and I just won't ever care back and I'd say okay fine I can do that and and we'd just do that for the rest of whenever and I'd I don't know. I don't know. I .

I should go back. I really have to. I don't want to. For the first time in a long time I don't even want you here. I'm tired of wanting. I want to stop. I want to go away. I want to do something that isn't this. And I can't handle it when he's upset so I don't know how to go home.

I'm gonna. chuck this thing in the bin. I'm not making you read it. I should burn all this crap but I'd. I don't know. I just don't know. I keep trying to say the right thing but I'm tired and I wish you and he were different people to who you are. I wish you weren't you.

Anyway. Fuck you. And I'm sorry. And I hope you're safe. And whatever I said, I didn't mean it. If I could burn your mother and everybody who's ever smiled at her to the

ground I'd do it. James killed Orion last year. Don't know if you saw it. Don't know if it matters now.

I love you. And that's something I can say. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you.

All of the bugs are reported dead when they get the new post a few days later, like small soldiers who didn't make it home to London. Every last one.

Lily stares at James when he gives her the news, standing in the kitchen doorway. "Oh," she says.

"Yeah," James tells her. "Sorry."

"It's okay." She draws a deep, solitary breath and lets it out. Then, her face crumples like paper. Like a building. She stands up and walks out, shoulders high and tight, like neither of them has noticed it. Remus doesn't point it out.

He and James stare at one another for a few moments. James is standing with a bag of letters under his arm and the cloak flung over his shoulder, face flushed a little with the chill. Remus has a cup of tea and a headache cupped in his blueish hands.

"Yeah," James says. Then, he turns on his heel and stalks off into the apartment.

Remus sighs, looking back at the letter in his hands. It's from a Ravenclaw firstie (pureblood, but not of the twenty-eight), scared they'll hurt her if she gets bad marks on tests. Stuff like that is common. As gruelling as the letters asking after dead parents are, the letters fearing death, the letters mourning friends, the simpler, younger ones are almost worst. This kid has no idea what their life is going to

be for the next few years, Remus thinks, and puts the letter down to get up and make more tea. It's sort of become a coping mechanism of its own. Funny how that goes.

Lily stalks back in and sits down at the kitchen table opposite Remus' spot. Remus fills the kettle without looking at her, then turns to lean against the countertop as it begins to heat.

"Alright?" he asks, after a handful of seconds.

Lily nods stiffly. "James has taken the bedroom."

"Oh."

She's got a piece of paper spread out in front of her. As Remus watches, she chews the end of her pen, then scribbles down a name, and then a first line.

"Who's that for?" he asks.

Lily jumps, seeming to have forgotten he was there. "I've decided we need to find another way in," she says.

Remus stares for a bit. "Oh."

"Since the postbox won't work."

"Right," Remus says. "Uh."

Lily looks up from her letter, pen stilling. "What's wrong?"

"I just... I guess..." Remus trails off. "I guess I'd assumed we were done with teamwork. For now. With everything."

Lily blinks at him. "What?"

"Not in a bad way. Just. You know."

"I..." She hesitates. "I don't know. I don't mean to invalidate you, Remus, I don't. I just..."

There's movement in the hallway. Remus stiffens, bracing to see James' face appear, but instead, Marlene comes around the corner, leaning against the doorframe with her arms crossed. Her short, dark hair hangs in a thundercloud around her face, hacked off around the sides.

"Alright?" she nods to Remus.

Remus nods back. "Are you?"

"Just fine." Marlene hesitates, as if she's not allowed to be there, or perhaps she simply doesn't want to be. After a few seconds, she shuffles in and takes a seat beside Lily.

It's her birthday in a week, and shortly after that, Lily's. January is almost over already, and all of it has been misery. Remus has never been the type to bemoan wasted time (every extra year survived is another three hundred and sixty-five days stolen from death, and he's learned to be thankful for each of them), but if he was ever to grieve for a time, he thinks it'd be now, in the same house as James but miles away from him, spending his days reading letters and pacing in circles and avoiding his friends.

"Have you and James made up yet?" Marlene asks Remus, after some time.

Remus flinches. "Uh." That's direct. "No."

"Ah. Right." She doesn't look particularly impressed.

"We'll get there."

"Yeah."

Lily clears her throat. "I've been looking at tickets for a passenger boat headed for Normandy on the evening of your birthday next week. Going out of, erm, Blackpool. We can get the train down."

"That's good." Marlene smiles faintly. "I'll pay you back."

"Of course you will." Lily hesitates. "Where are you planning to go?"

"Western Europe, for a while." Marlene shrugs. "Find someplace they can't find me. Get a job at a tourist trap. Then travel."

"Right."

"I think I'll be okay."

Lily nods. Remus watches her chew her lip. Something strange seems to consume her, there one moment, gone the next, like how she looked when she stared down at the jar of bugs.

"You might see me out there," she says eventually.

Remus' heavy heart sinks lower into the pit of his stomach. There it is, he thinks, with a dull sort of finality. That's it, then.

Peter,

Hope you're okay. Sorry our reply to the last one's been so slow. James and I have been really busy. He's not here with me to write this one, but I promise he's alright. We're all surviving. Don't believe everything you read in the papers,

okay? It's bullshit, most of it. We're not hurting anyone. Most of the time, it's the opposite.

This summer, you need to make some decisions about this stuff, okay? James and I have already agreed that if your final decision is to stick it out at Hogwarts, we won't stop you, especially not with what's at stake, but there's a war going on out here, and if you want to make the decision to fight, there's no shortage of work to be done.

I hope you're okay, Pete, really. I'm sorry. I know how hard things must have been. Well... I don't, really, but things have been really hard for us, too. I wish things could be like they were in school again. James dragging us around to all his bright ideas. Living in his slipstream when everything was simpler.

Write back as soon as you can, okay? I'm going to be based with James and Lily for at least another month. I miss talking to you, Wormy, really. And I bet Sirius does, too. I'll get James in on the next letter, I promise. He's just got a lot to deal with right now.

Cheers,

Your friend always, Remus.

A few nights later, James and Remus end up staying up late together, working on an overdue set of deliveries to make to the midlands the following day. It's the first instance in which they've spent any amount of time together willingly since the New Year's moon. They don't speak to one another, and they work on their own individual piles, and James gets through his own in such a hurry that Remus knows he's making a sloppy job of it just so he can get out of the room quickly.

Moonlight lashes over the window. The moon is fast approaching, and Remus already aches with it. The wolf is angry, tearing at him from the inside like it has swallowed a tempest. Remus isn't sure why it surprises him anymore. It's been hungry since Sirius left. Now, with James so tenuously distant, it's ravenous. Remus has been debating asking James not to come with him to the moon this time at all, just in case the wolf is too angry to handle.

Now, though, in the quiet and the dim, only one light on and the world a soft amber glow, that's a problem for the morning. Remus bins one spam letter, probably a prank from a younger year, and then shuffles another letter into a pile to be delivered to the ministry covertly (mostly to ministry employees with school-age kids who haven't actively declared a mission statement of murdering all muggleborns quite yet).

"I miss you," James says, like he hates that it's true.

Remus' hand stills over the next letter in the pile. He thinks long and hard over what to say to that. "You do?" he asks eventually.

James nods. When Remus looks up at him, he looks miserable beyond belief. "Yeah."

"Oh."

They sit with that between them. James tugs and fiddles with the sleeves of his hoodie, and Remus stares into his lap. Neither speaks for some time.

"I just don't get it," James sighs eventually. "I don't get why you think we don't care."

Remus shrugs. "That's not it."

"You said it was."

"It's complicated."

"You've told me you don't like home. That it's bad."

"Home is bad," Remus sighs. He thinks about Regulus, inexplicably.

"Then why try to save it?"

"Because... I don't know." Remus rubs his face with both hands, hard enough that he hopes it'll knock his brain flat out of his skull and then maybe he can start all of this over. "I don't know, James. I couldn't give you an answer."

James stares at him. Remus doesn't meet his eyes. "Do you miss it there? We can go back. We can go back together, if you want. Move the PO box and... and get a place. Rent somewhere. Rent's cheap in South Wales, right?"

Remus chokes on a laugh. "It is cheap."

"And we could be together, still."

"We could."

"Then let's do it," James says decisively.

And it's hard like trying to crack open a mountain, but Remus shakes his head.

"I'm sorry," he mumbles. "I just don't think I can."

James bristles. "Doing this together is what's kept us alive--"

"And it's almost killed us."

"We've taken care of each other."

"And we can't keep doing it forever."

"All you're doing is making excuses!"

"If I don't save my home, nobody's going to do it. If I don't prove myself to the Order--"

James throws out a hand to grab Remus' own, squeezing so tight it hurts. "Fuck the Order. Fuck them. Proving ourselves is what got us under house arrest in the first place..."

"I'll do it right this time."

"But I can tell that isn't what you care about."

Remus doesn't know how to tell James, *if I stay, I'm scared we won't find him. If I stay, I'm scared we will. If I stay, I'll do something I regret, like love him too much or ask you for more than I can offer you. If I stay, I'm scared I'll never leave.*

"I need to help," is what actually comes out. "My home's broken and it's shit, and I hate what I am, but I need to help."

James doesn't get angry or shout. All the temper for this year has been burnt out of him early, a premature death. He folds and his forehead meets the table and Remus watches the knobbly curve of his back as it jerks under his shirt like it's trying to find its way out. His shoulders shake and the dark hair on his head strains up at the ceiling. Remus doesn't take his hand again. He just sits and watches.

If Sirius was here, Remus has the space to think, he'd probably laugh or something else stupid. It would make it all worse and it would make it all better.

James pushes himself to his feet, wiping his face. "I tried," he says, voice shaking. "I did."

"I know."

"I wanted this to work."

"You didn't do anything wrong," Remus murmurs. "We're just not kids anymore, Jamie."

"Don't call me that."

"James."

James wipes his face with his sleeve. "Sorry," he sobs, and then he darts out of the room and hurtles off into the darkness of the flat, leaving Remus with the pile of unsorted mail as the clock ticks past midnight on another of their final days.

Lupin,

We've been informed of your prospective plans. So long as this commences once you've come of age and not before it, we have concluded that we would be in favour. Having you on side has been a great gamble. We thank you for having proven it is possible that it might pay off.

You will begin attending Order meetings again commencing in February, without your companions. It has been concluded by the Order that your work is most in need of

guidance. You will inform nobody of your plan who isn't already aware.

Don't fuck this up, Lupin.

- Alastor Moody.

The morning of Marlene's birthday dawns slate-grey. They exchange presents over cold kippers for breakfast, and Marlene pretends to enjoy them, though they all know she's going to leave them behind when she goes. That morning, the five of them cluster around the kitchen table like they did for Christmas and play Black Jack and Bitch and Jackswitch and other stupid muggle card games, which are less exciting than the wizard ones but a little easier to play for longer. Everything feels less ephemeral when you take the magic from it.

"Think I'll miss this place," Marlene remarks, wandering from room to room with a heavy duffel bag slung across her. "When I'm outta here."

"Should hope so," James jokes. "We made grand accommodations."

She makes a face at him. He makes a face right back. Remus says nothing, thinking he doesn't have the right to.

Mary doesn't cry as they get ready to head for the train station, which is surprising in itself. Remus had certainly expected it from her. She doesn't cry when they get to Paddington either, or when they take the overground south out of London, or when they transfer to the line to Blackpool, or when they reach the port city and head for the bay.

Blackpool has the heavy, oppressive chill of dementors, too. It has the clinical boxiness of a trade city, with high, square grey buildings and flat rooftops and a long railway track worming all the way around it. James wears the cloak, standing on the edge of their little procession alongside Remus. Occasionally, he touches Remus' arm just to let him know he's still there and hasn't been swept away in the crowd. Remus tries not to shiver.

They spend half an hour in the bay trying to find the right boat, by which point it's so close to departure that they don't even really have time for a proper goodbye, as one of the sailors hovers on the dockside impatiently, waiting to help Marlene over the gap onto the deck.

She hugs Lily and then Remus, ignoring James. Then, she turns to Mary.

Surprisingly, Mary still doesn't cry. They embrace like old lovers there, like they've been apart for a very long time. Marlene runs a weathered hand over the back of Mary's dark head. They sway on the dock until Remus is sure they'll both break and beg to go back to London together. Neither does.

All too soon, Marlene pulls away. She holds Mary's dark face between her hands and kisses her forehead with such ferocity that Remus aches to see it.

"You'll be okay," she promises. "You'll be okay."

"I know," Mary whispers. "I know."

They stare at one another. Remus gets the distinct impression that they both understand one another very much.

"Tell Dorcas I said hi, okay?" Marlene says. She laughs in a very breathless way and steps over the gap from the dock to the boat. Her hair whips around her face. "And stay alive!"

"Okay!" Mary cries after her, hands twitching in front of her like she wants to drag Marlene back to shore. "Bye!"

"Bye," Marlene shouts back. She grins at Remus and winks, and then turns to the hull of the ship and stands against it as the sailors untether from the docks and they begin to drift away on the dark ocean, out towards the mouth of the bay.

Still, Mary doesn't cry.

The four of them stand there in the blistering white wind until the boat is out of sight completely, only a speck on the broad, black horizon. Lily threads an arm through Mary's. They watch the ocean together. Remus stands in silence, swaying a little with the heavy pull of the moon. He, like the tide, feels drawn out with it, not quite there, like grains of him are being swept away. He knows already that he won't remember this time very well.

"We should go back," Lily murmurs, once the boat is out of sight and it's just them standing there, as if waiting for something important to happen.

"Okay," Mary murmurs. "You're right. Of course."

Lily leads her up the docks again, back towards grey-black Blackpool, dark and striped like shadows over them. Remus goes to follow.

"Wait." And James, the cloak tucked into his jacket now, grabs Remus' arm. "Just give us a minute, Lils?"

Lily peers over her shoulder at both of them. Her short hair has gotten long enough to bluster around her face, a light, auburn mess, choppy along the bottom. She looks more herself than she ever has, Remus thinks, as she nods and continues to lead Mary away, half carrying her, murmuring condolences like it's a funeral march.

James turns back to the docks. It's almost abandoned now, night setting in fast. By the time they make it back to London, it'll be bitch black.

He folds his arms on the railing. Without prompting, Remus mirrors him, standing beside him. They watch the waves together as they seep into the bay, rocking the white boats on the black water like birds in a pond.

"Shit," James says. Then, he laughs, properly laughs. The sound rises from him and the wind soars it away. "Shit, right?"

Despite himself, Remus laughs too. "Shit."

"Shit."

"That's some... this is all..." Remus trails off.

James nods. He stares off over the ocean, out and out through the misty evening, to where Remus imagines France might stretch like some large, dark ghost, heavy and stark as the colour of Somerset beyond his old home on the coast.

"I don't want to fight anymore," James says plaintively. "I'm so tired of fighting."

"With the war, or with me?"

"Mostly you."

"Right," Remus says. He offers James his hand.

Between their folded arms, James takes it. They turn back to the bay again, that single point of contact so hot and bright between them that none of the past few weeks even seems to matter much anymore.

"I don't understand it," James sighs. "And I don't want it. And I don't agree with you."

"I know."

"And it hurts, Remus. It fucking hurts. That you're going. That you're just gonna leave."

"I know," Remus placates softly. "I know."

"You don't know. You don't know anything," James intones.

Remus squeezes his fingers tight within his own. "We have another month," he promises. "And the war's gonna end someday."

"You believe that?"

"Of course," Remus lies.

James nods. "Yeah," he whispers, perhaps to himself. "Yeah. It's gonna be over someday."

Then, he turns to Remus with an odd sort of intensity in his face and kisses him. Remus kisses back and thanks the lord there aren't muggles or anybody around. It's hot and awkward and weird. Neither of their lips are used to it.

James pulls away. Like Marlene, he takes Remus' face between his palms and cradles it there. "We'll find our way back to each other."

Remus thinks of Sirius, Sirius and the black dog, of the grim that he doodled on the back of Remus' hand in transfiguration in their second year before he knew what his form would even be. How death followed him, even then. He thinks of the wolf, rabid and crazed, and of broken South Wales and watching friends die. He thinks of the colour the sky was the night James found his way back home in the summer, broken and breaking.

"Yeah," he murmurs, and doesn't mean it at all. "Of course we will."

"You promise?"

Remus nods. "I promise," he says dutifully.

James nods. "We're parts of each other," he presses, with a dangerously loyal edge to it. "That's not something that just goes away."

"I know, James."

"You can't throw it away."

"I know."

"And you're sure you won't change your mind?"

"It won't be forever," Remus sighs. "I promise you it won't be forever."

James hesitates. Then his hands have withdrawn back to himself and he fumbles inside his jacket for something.

Remus watches as he pulls out the long, silvery mass of the invisibility cloak.

"This," James mutters, pressing it to Remus' chest. "This. You take this with you."

"James..."

"I mean it!" James cuts in. "Trust me. You'll need it more than me."

"James, you're wanted."

"I'll wear sunglasses."

"I can't take this!"

"You don't have a choice!"

Remus fists a hand in the soft, light fabric. It smells like James and he holds it fast against the lower part of his face. The gentle fabric of it seems to welcome him home.

"I can't," he murmurs, resolve weakening.

"Yes, you can," James promises him. He takes Remus' face and kisses him again, again, again, on his jaw and his lips and the front of his chin. Remus opens his mouth and James doesn't stop. Their teeth clack together. "You can."

"You're going to be the death of me," Remus mumbles. Desperately, he wants to change his mind. "You know that, don't you?"

James laughs, a little manic. "That's him," he says. "You're mixing me up with him."

And isn't that ironic, Remus thinks. James kisses him again and all of a sudden it tastes like somebody else is there, but when Remus pulls away, hands full of invisibility cloak, staring around wildly, it's just him and James on the docks; just him and James and the black ocean under them, waves drawing out and out to Europe, out and out away from here.

Chapter End Notes

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FISSURE

Chapter Notes

OKAY HI! THIS FIC HAS GOTTEN A LOT OF ATTENTION THIS LAST FEW DAYS

TO ANY NEW READERS: i would give my life for u. ily tysm for reading

for anybody who's commented: i ADORE you and every single comment i get makes me fucking riot. i go insane n eat drywall.

tws for this one: lots of conflict, some injury/blood, discussion of trauma

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Pads,

We've told the Friends we're giving up the apartment by the end of March. I don't quite know how to feel about it.

Numb, I suppose? Is the best word for it? I dunno. Tired. That's a good one. If I'm anything, I'm bloody exhausted. Remus is back to sharing the bed with me and he hogs it most of the time because sleeping in the kitchen fucked up his back, so I don't complain. He's sort of clingy right now. I think he missed me.

We haven't told the Order we're doing this yet. We're going to wait until we've gotten the January moon over with (it's tomorrow night), and Lily's birthday (the day after), and then we're going to let them know. I'll be moving in with them, at least for a bit. Lily's going overseas.

I sort of expected it. When Remus said he was leaving, I didn't think Lily and I would stick together. She's got plans to help out at some muggleborn sanctuary in northern Germany. Rostock. Wants to build someplace safe. I think she's excited but I can't really tell. Both of them are worried about me.

Anyway. We've still got another month, almost two months, really. My birthday's last out of all of us. We're going to separate after that.

Fuck, Pads. I don't know what I'll do. I can tell both of them want to do this, and more than that, they need to do this. I get that. I do. I just don't know how I'll cope on my own, honestly, and I'm scared to find out. I don't know how to do the washing or iron clothes or whatever. I can't even cook very well. And that's not the bit that scares me most but I figure you know that already.

Remus has got one of his elbows digging right into my ribs so I'm going to stop soon and lie down properly and turn the light off. It's late and neither of them is going to tell me to go to sleep but they both want me to. I guess I just wanted to tell you that the decision is final. We're really doing this. Throwing away everything we have because... I dunno. I want to blame Remus. I want to blame myself. I even want to blame you. But that doesn't matter.

Anyway. I love you.

Yours,

Prongs.

With their next lot of outgoing mail from the Gryffindor common room postbox, James is the one to go get it. He

shucks on the cloak at six in the morning and wanders out into the bitter cold, buying a croissant along the way, paying too much in change for it. Remus and Lily sleep on in the apartment, in the warm darkness of the first bedroom. Mary is alone in the second one, now. She seems to talk even less.

Lambeth's gotten sort of homey. It still smells like Sirius and tastes like a funeral, but the smoke feels less choking and more like a sort of blanket. The future has seemed far away for all the time they've been here. James has sort of expected to spend the rest of his life in this stasis for some time. Making tea and reading letters.

There's no time for mourning, though, not today; there is mail to be delivered.

Big load of it today. James clamps the pastry bag between his teeth and it smacks against his chin as he shuffles piles of letters into his backpack. Forty or so, maybe. About two thirds of them from Hogwarts, James would wager, and the rest from the Royal Mail earlier this morning, from senders strung out through Britain.

Once the PO box is empty, James treks back through the dust across the car park and into the cold sunlight. Moon tonight. And after that, Lily's birthday. And after that, more tremulous time, which will all go too fast, he's sure of it. This whole year has been too fast. It feels like minutes ago, sometimes, that his parents were still here and Sirius was still some abstract goal to be achieved. Not a ghost that haunts them all.

He puts the thought from his mind. *Pads*, he writes in his head. *The thought of you is starting to make me miserable. That's never really happened before.*

Back at the flat, Lily is awake, but not Remus. She nods to James over a mug of gold roast instant coffee and James nods back.

“One for you?” she asks. “Kettle’s still hot.”

“Ta.” James plops his backpack down on the table. “Good haul today.”

“Good.”

“He’s still asleep?”

Lily nods, pouring James an absurdly milky cup of coffee. “Pre-moon,” she sighs. “You two need to get out of here soon. I can handle letters.”

“We can stay behind for a few extra hours? Moon doesn’t come up so early now, not like in December.”

Lily shakes her head and smiles at him, the first real smile she’s given James in some time. “I can handle it,” she says, perhaps a little tetchily.

“Got it.” James takes the coffee from her and, perhaps in a surge of affection or perhaps just because he thinks he should, grabs Lily’s shoulder and kisses the side of her head, lips against her short hair.

Lily goes still for a second. When James pulls away, she smiles at him, a little confused. “What was that for?”

“Dunno. Feeling sentimental.”

“Right.” She reaches out to squeeze the inside of his elbow, a fond look to her. “Go take care of him.”

James nods. “Yeah. Yeah. Got it.”

Down the hallway he goes, and in the bedroom it's still dark, the curtains drawn tight. Remus is a small knot of limbs under two blankets curled around all of the pillows they've got (Lily must have given him some of hers), and he doesn't look up when James enters.

Sighing, James sets the coffee mug down on the floor and sits on the bed beside him. "Hey. You awake?"

Remus groans and his back goes stiff and twitchy against James'. "No."

"Oh, I see. Guess I'll leave."

He snares James' wrist. "Coffee?"

"Lily made one for me. 'S not how you take it, though."

"Doesn't matter. We have to go soon, right?"

James pets the side of Remus' hair absently, where it sticks up out of the blankets in a mousey mess. "We can wait. If you want."

Remus squirms, rolling over. He peers out at James, quilt pulled up over his nose. "Headache," he says.

"I know. Anything?"

"Two ibuprofen, one paracetamol," Remus requests. "And something to eat with them so they don't fuck with my stomach. And that coffee."

"The things I do for you."

"It's because you love me," Remus sighs. He almost seems to mean it. "Can you close the curtains?"

“They’re already closed,” James half-laughs. He puts a hand over Remus’ eyes, over the top of his warm face. Sheilds him from the light. “Better?”

Remus hums. “Better. Coffee?”

“Right.”

They work through the morning like that, Remus wrenching himself through the processes of being a human (coffee, water, shower, clothes, other such nonsense) and James hovering nearby to watch and keep guard. It stays grey outside. Lily burrows through their store of letters with a sort of fever and doesn’t speak much to either of them.

When the time comes, they get changed into their warm clothes in relative silence. James packs plasters and blister patches and stuff, and a thermos of hot tea to share. Remus stares at his boots for a long time before he puts them on. They exist between long stretches of impenetrable silence. It’s been a few days since Blackpool and Marlene and everything. Sort of feels like it’s been years.

When the time comes to take the train to the south-east, Lily stops them at the door.

“I’ve got some stuff I want to talk about when you get back tomorrow,” she says, like she’s been planning the words.

James glances from her to Remus, and then back to her. “We’ve had a lot of talks recently.”

“I know. This is important.” She draws a tight breath. “It’s about Hogwarts.”

“Do you need to tell us now?” Remus asks, ever the gentle one.

“Not yet. When the moon’s over.” Lily looks from Remus to James as if she’s drinking them both in. “Good luck out there.”

“We’ll be careful,” James promises, as cheerily as he can manage. “We always are.”

The walk to the train station is silent, silent as the dead, and likewise, so is the train ride itself. James and Remus pass the thermos back and forth, taking small sips so as not to burn the roofs of their mouths, sitting close but perhaps not close enough. Remus moves a few times like he wants to rest his head on James’ shoulder and has chosen against it.

By the time they’ve made it to the coast, the heavy grey evening is already setting in. This will be one of the last moons they take together out here, it occurs to James. And doesn’t that just suck.

“Can we stay in the town for a bit?” Remus asks, when they get off at the platform. “I fancy...” He trails off.

“We can wander,” James indulges. He doesn’t think he could offer anything else if he tried. “C’mon. Think they’ve got a square somewhere. There was a busker last week.”

There’s no busker this week. Evidently, it’s far too cold. All the windows are frosted like icing and wince down at the both of them, high and bright. Remus and James wander through the streets for a while as the darkness sets in, not really talking. Remus leans on him quite heavily, limbs going gammy with the beginnings of evening.

“We should head up,” James says as gently as he can, as it passes four.

Remus nods unsteadily. He sways a bit. “Cold.”

"I know." James shunts an arm around his back. "C'mon. Bit further."

They cut out of the village together, up the steep hill, through the forest. Remus doesn't speak for most of it, blue hands curled into half-fists at his side. Bitter wind lashes off the grey ocean and rainclouds loom across from France. Mainland Europe hovers like a ghost just beyond the mist. When James squints, he thinks he can see it.

By the time they make it to their usual spot, among the yellow flowers and the rapeseed, the cold dampness on the air has misted, blustering against their faces in tiny speckles of rain, soft and chilling. Remus sits in the wet mud with a defeated grunt. James sits beside him.

"Clothes?" he asks, as the sky darkens.

Remus hesitates. "I'm cold," he says plaintively.

"Come on." James manages to coax him out of his jacket and trousers and lets Remus keep the rest on, leaving him in a shirt and boxers and socks. They shuffle together and shiver against the wind. "Bit longer now."

Remus nods. When James looks at him next, he's chewing his scarred lip, so drawn and pale that all of his features look darkened, from the red veins in his eyes to the shadows under his sallow cheeks. James didn't know it was possible for a person to look blue with cold and yellow with sickness at the same time. It gives Remus the appearance of a very tired, very ratty teenage gouache painting.

"This one's going to suck," Remus tells him. Shuddering, he inches closer. "Balls, it's freezing."

"I'm sure it'll be fine," James replies, not addressing the second part. He locks his own hands around the front of Remus' shoulder and wrangles him between the gap in his arms, keeping him there.

"It's horrible."

"I know."

"He's angry."

James has never heard Remus talk about the wolf like it's a person before, really. "I know. Sorry."

Remus shrugs. He nudges closer still, jittering like broken machinery. "Nights like this remind me of when I was a kid," he says, teeth chattering.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Used to storm a lot, on the coast."

"Oh."

Remus shrugs. "I don't like rain much. Makes the transformations worse. My bones creak for days."

"You'll make a very good old man."

"Provided I get there."

James chews on that bitterness for a while. "Of course you will."

Remus doesn't reply but for a short grunt. "Change. Change, James. James. Change."

James rolls into the yellow flowers, gathering his feet beneath him. Rain lashes down in earnest now, and he obeys.

Remus heaves and twitches and then screams with the transformation, writhing on the desolate black earth. His neck cranes outwards, the bones along the front of his throat distending, growing new joints. For an electric moment, he meets James' eyes. Then, he screams again, wrists both breathing, finger bones all cracking in a sharp, unholy chorus; the humanity bleeds out of him into the soil.

James hoofs at the ground and whinnies uncomfortably. He tries to take a step forward and Remus snaps his teeth at him, which are already growing longer than his mouth, piercing bloody sores into the insides of his lips, dripping scarlet.

When the transformation is done, the wolf is unsteady on its feet, standing and wobbling as the flowers whip in the wind around it. It seems not to fully know where it is, greyish flank rippling with cold, and it snorts a spot of blood out of its mouth.

James advances on it, half playful, half challenging. It teeters on its paws and falls back a little, staggering. Then, it lunges at him.

Oh, shit.

James canters back in a broad circle, rearing onto his hind legs with a panicked sound that rumbles through his broad, equine chest. With the dizzying rush of oxygen to his head, rain splatters his face in a misty gush. The wolf barks and snarls and sets about trying to circle him.

Trying to manage the situation (despite how desperately the stag wants to stand its ground and maintain its dignity, fuck that guy, honestly, James wishes his stupid animal voice would just shut up), James lowers his head, tries to stay unimimidating. Tries to let the predator know that he's backing down. This isn't a fight. He can't afford to make it a fight.

The wolf stalks around him in a large circle, greyish form rippling like an eel through the flowers. The dark sky overhead is too thick with cloud cover to see the moon, but instinctively, James knows where it is, and he puts his back to it. He intends to allow the wolf to sniff him out. To recognise him. Perhaps it's the rain, he tells himself, that has made him harder to discern as friend, not foe.

He stays still, head low, very tense all over. Snarling in the back of its throat, the wolf circles all the way around him, then begins to advance, low to the ground, nose twitching. James raises his great head to look at it, and its dark mouth is open wide in a snarl, bright teeth bare against the night. Remus was right, he supposes.

The wolf edges closer. James himself edges backwards, lowering himself close to the ground to give himself time to spring up and flee, should he need to. The heavy, misty rain has soaked through his red coat already. He feels weak and weighted under it and the stare of the canine.

A soft growl sounds out before him. James stays perfectly still. He and the wolf meet eyes. Overhead, the clouds part just slightly, and a sliver of moonlight descends to the black earth.

The wolf pounces.

James rears back, neighing frantically. Sharp teeth snare inches from his snout, gnashing and tearing at open air. The wolf hurtles at him, barking and snarling, feet scrabbling against the wet ground, and even the stag is afraid now, so James rears around and makes a break for it through the fields.

If there's one thing he outstrips all the other marauders for, after all, it's speed.

The wolf chases him all the way through the rapeseed field and over the sty into the next one, a dark, snarling cloud cutting through the grass behind him. James runs him in circles until he's burning with exhaustion, no time for rest, no time for a break. They loop that two-mile stretch of farmland until it must be close to two or three in the morning, over and over, the wolf never far behind. It feels almost like a game, until James remembers that he's running for his life.

A few hours in, however, James does it; he loses the wolf.

The quiet of the night sets in and the smell of the predator has faded. Somewhere far into the fields, a mile or two away, he thinks he must have left him. James slows to a stop, pawing the ground and snorting clouds of hot white mist into the frigid air. The rain has stopped and the night is very still. Even the wind seems to have tempered. His vision is worse as a stag, and the world is divided into the dark earth and sky, and the black line of the ocean beyond the fields, and not much more than that.

He listens intently for breathing, for rustling, hovering on a flattened tractor path through a mulled field. The thick, earthy smell of wet soil festers around him. If Padfoot was here, it occurs to him, he'd be rolling around in the mud

just to get the rest of them all dirty. Peter would have already taken his place on the top of James' head, behind the jutting root of one of his antlers. And the wolf would be tussling with Sirius, and all would be well.

Distantly, over the fields, there rings a faint howl. The stag knows that noise; it knows pain when it hears it.

Before he can stop himself, James has taken off towards the noise, back through the soil and overgrown grass. Lashing weeds tear at his legs as he gallops, kicking up chunks of soil, almost slipping in its scattering mess as he hurtles towards the sound.

Two fields over, he finds Remus; the wolf is entangled in a patch of barbed wire, whining pitifully. A snare of it is caught around its neck and its big, amberish eyes are wide with fear.

Fuck, James says, and run, the stag says, and he stands there in a sort of stasis for a bit, just watching. The wolf's free back paws scrabble at the earth to pull itself out. It's bleeding where the barbs are digging in.

Against his better judgement and against the recommendation of the half of his brain, James advances slowly. The wolf tries to snap its jaws at him and gets a stripe of barbed wire stuck between its great fangs for the trouble, and whines as it cuts into its black gums.

Very gingerly, James leans down his head and hooks the end of one of his antlers around a coil of barbed wire. He tugs it away and the wolf's head rears away. It spits and hacks out the wire entangled around its teeth and scatters backwards against the earth, whining, bleeding, free.

James steps back. Again, they're watching each other. Then, the wolf lowers its bleeding head to the ground and crawls over the sty, whimpering. It's given up on the fight. James noses at it and it snuffles him back, their snouts bumping together.

For the rest of the night, they lie near the wire, the wolf curled into a ball and licking its wounds, James a few feet away with his legs tucked under himself and his head low to the ground. They don't show affection to one another (it doesn't seem that the wolf has recognised him as James yet, just as not-a-threat, not-prey). They just lie in the rain. That's fine with James. He thinks he's pulled every muscle he's got.

When the moon sinks and grey dawn begins to strip the sky, Remus changes back almost completely silently, but for a faint groan. James shifts back too, exhausted, aching. They crawl to one another through the mud, reaching out for each other, hands all grimy.

"What did I do?" Remus asks sluggishly, around the great bleeding punctures in the skin of his jaw.

"We're alright," James replies. He reaches Remus and wrangles them away from a patch of nettles to lean against the wooden sty, both of them covered in mud and soaked with the rain. "You didn't hurt me."

Remus shakes his head. He's quivering so hard he's like a live wire. Like badly insulated electricity.

"The wolf was bad tonight," he says. "I don't remember anything."

"You chased me around a bit. Nothing too bad."

"Did I hurt you?"

James has cuts all around his ankles and calves, and he thinks he's not going to be able to walk properly for at least a week. "Nah."

Remus groans. "Barbed wire?" he asks, feeling around his bloody face.

"Yeah. I got you out."

"Thanks."

"Don't worry about it." James puts an arm around him and tugs them into the same space until they're almost the same body, both of them shivering now. "It's fine."

"Bloody freezing."

"I've got your clothes."

Remus shoves him off. "In a bit. We should find that river in the forest. Mud."

"Yeah."

"Yeah."

James breathes in the smell of earth and grass and blood, reminding himself that he's still alive. "I don't think it recognised me."

"Oh."

"It's okay. It'll be better next time. Reckon it was the wind."

Remus nods, not seeming to believe it. He hitches up his shoulders to make himself small. "Fuck," he whispers.

"Yeah," James agrees. Then, despite himself, he falls asleep.

By the time they make it back to the flat, it's near dark. They had to take a later train. They're both hobbling and limping, leaning heavily on one another to stay standing. Remus' face is mostly plasters and James' is mostly bruises. Sort of fitting, that.

Lily is sitting at the kitchen table over a cold Tesco apple crumble, looking quite miserable. When James and Remus stumble in, she looks up, forcing a smile across her tired features.

"Everything go okay?" she asks, even though it's obvious that it didn't.

James drops Remus into a chair. "Sorry we're late," he says.

"It's fine."

Remus' chin lolls against his chest. "Are you okay?"

Lily nods. "Just fine." But she doesn't look very fine.

"Did the letters go okay?"

A very tremulous nod. "Just fine."

James sighs heavily. He knows, already, what he's got to do. "I'm going out," he says shortly. "Be back soon."

Lily stares at him. "We still have to talk."

"I know. I said I'd be back soon."

She shakes her head at him. "Your face... I've still got enough stuff to heal it."

James waves her off. "Back soon. Promise." And before he can stop himself, he limps back out of the apartment and slams the door closed behind him.

It's not a long walk down the nearest Tesco. He doesn't have enough change in his jacket to get much of anything, so James ends up getting an iced madeira cake in one of those plasticky cardboard punnets, a thin film spread over the top to keep it fresh. The cashier gives him a weird look but doesn't comment on the mud and bruises and the like. So long as James can pay, that's really all that matters.

As he's stepping back out of the front door of the shop, James runs headlong into a man. Mumbling an apology, he tries to slip past. But the guy grabs his arm.

"Merlin, James, what happened to you?"

James looks up and gasps. "Oh, uh. Hi, Jeremiah."

Jeremiah peers at him. "Thought you lot were still under house arrest?"

"Oh, we are. Uh." James thinks fast. "I fell down the stairs. Yesterday morning. I'm not a morning person."

"Your apartment doesn't have stairs."

Fuck. "The, uh, stairs outside."

"You're covered in mud." Jeremiah grips his arm a bit tighter and pulls James away from the light of the shopfront, where it might be harder for onlookers to see their faces. "What happened?"

James stares from Jeremiah to the ground. "Uh," he says. "I... can't really, uh, say."

"We've got orders to tell Moody if you're out fighting, James," Jeremiah sighs, with surprising firmness. "You look like hell."

"You should see Remus."

"Explain?"

"Uh," James sighs. "Okay, listen. I would love to, but... it's Lily's birthday, I got her a cake. Look. It's her favourite and everything. And I just really want to get home. Can we do this another time?"

"Not really, no."

James sighs. "I really am okay. Nobody's attacking us and we haven't been fighting. It's not that."

"There's been talk in the Order about you lot being allowed to help us at all."

"We know."

"Well, wandering around London with your face bashed in isn't going to help anyone. Especially not yourselves." Jeremiah sighs and lets him go. "If it means that much to you. Go home."

"Thank you," James says quickly. "Thank you so much." And he takes off before Jeremiah can change his mind.

When he gets back to the flat, it's pitch black out, the sky starless. James jogs up to the apartment and realises he's

left the door open. Cursing under his breath, he wanders inside, making sure to lock it behind him.

At the kitchen table, Remus has switched seats to sit beside Lily and their legs are tangled between them as she leans close to stitch the gashes in his jaw and around his mouth. They both look up as he walks in.

"Surprise," James exclaims, with little gusto. He pulls the slightly squashed cake out of his jacket. "Happy birthday!"

Lily stares at the cake. "It's my favourite," she murmurs.

"I know. You told me that. First night we were in London. Little Tesco's, to get, uh, a toothbrush and air freshener," James remembers fondly.

"Oh, James," Lily sighs. She sounds almost devastated. Remus leans back to let her get up, and she crosses the room to give him a big hug, which James reciprocates without raising his arms very high, shoulders burning. "Thank you."

"You'd do the same for me," James replies. "Sorry we've been out most of the day."

Lily waves him off. "Been a worse day than you for me, I guess." She peers into his face. "I've got some bruise salve?"

"I'll be alright. Just need to lie down."

"We've got that talk first," Remus reminds him, poking at one of the slabs of gauze on his face. "With Lily."

"Right."

"We can do it tomorrow, if you want?" Lily offers, not seeming to mean it.

"Course not," James sighs. "No rest for the wicked. Somebody make tea."

Domesticity is a language they've all come to understand, even if none of them speak it very well yet. They all sit down over coffee and tea and madeira cake. James shucks off his muddy boots and rubs some feeling back into his aching ankles. Lily stitches up Remus' face. It's mostly quiet. Somebody puts on the radio. Rain patters on the roof.

"You know something crazy," Remus says, Lily's needle sticking halfway into the purple flesh of his minced cheek. "We would be starting seventh year this year."

"Oh, fuck," James says absently, hugging one of Remus' ankles between two of his own under the table. "You're right."

"I've been thinking about that too," Lily admits with a sigh. "I've been thinking about school a lot. It's hard not to, I suppose. Think about it, I mean."

James doesn't think about it a lot, but he doesn't voice that. "Yeah, I guess," he says instead.

Remus takes a bite of his madeira and lets Lily get back to work on his cheek. "We didn't ever get our OWL results back, did we?"

"Oh, fuck," James says absently. "Hadn't even thought about that."

"Me neither," Lily gasps, a bit scandalised. Then she deflates. "Guess it doesn't matter much anymore, though,

does it? Remus, love, turn your face a bit. Thanks."

"Reckon I failed them all anyway." James stretches his hands far out in front of him, popping each of the knuckles in and out. "You guys probably did okay."

Lily shrugs. "They've probably burned my papers by now."

"Mine, too, if they've any sense," Remus puts in.

"Maybe once all this is over, we can take them all again," James laughs. "Get all O's. Game the system."

"I doubt they'd let us back in with the fifth years, James," Lily snorts.

"I'll homeschool you," Remus offers him fondly. "It'll be PA all over again."

"That sounds good," James indulges. "One of these days, I guess..."

He trails off. Lily finishes up Remus' face. He looks less pale, and less like he's falling apart in chunks, but James thinks the stitches give him the appearance of something only barely being held together. Like if they disappeared, he'd disintegrate.

Lily gets up to wash her bloody hands. James uses one of their disinfectant wipes to clean Remus' face and Remus leans into the touch willingly. Rain pounds harder still against the roof and windows.

When Lily sits back down, it's with a solid air of finality. She looks between Remus and James, folding her hands on the tabletop in front of her.

James finishes his cake. "Okay," he says. "Go ahead."

"Right," Lily sighs. "Well... I don't know how to say it, so I suppose I'll just get it on the table. I've been writing to Severus."

"Oh, okay," Remus says, startled.

James stares. "Since when?" he asks, trying and failing not to sound accusatory.

"Only once," Lily says quickly. "A week or so ago. Through the postbox. I asked Dorcas to slip it to him and he... he got back to me. With the last delivery, yesterday."

"Why?" James demands. "If he knows, if he finds out, we're fucked. Everyone who's been sending letters is fucked. The whole operation is fucked. What the fuck, Lily?"

"Just hear me out!" she snaps. "Listen to me for two seconds. Then you can get angry at me."

James folds his arms and scowls. She ignores him, talking to Remus then.

"I don't think he knows how Dorcas got my letter," she carries on. "I told Dorcas to be very careful. Since if it gets out in Slytherin house that there's a way of getting mail in and out unread, we're... listen, I was careful," she justifies, flustered now. "I thought it through."

"Okay," Remus says, with a sort of forced gentleness. "What did you write to him about?"

"It was after we, erm, got news. About the bugs." Lily takes a shaky breath and rubs the heel of her hand into her eye.

"I figured we needed another option, so... so I reached out."

"And told him you're with us?" James demands.

Lily winces. "He thinks I'm alone."

"Ohh," Remus says, with dawning comprehension. "Oh, Lily..."

"What?" James demands.

Lily clears her throat. "He thinks he can get us a way into the castle," she explains. "I just... haven't told him that it isn't just me yet. So... so that's sort of the position we're in right now."

"He'll kill James on the spot," Remus says. "You know he will."

Lily looks extremely conflicted. She looks from James to Remus and then down at the table, and then back at James. "I... was worried about that."

"I can take him," James defends.

"Without a wand?" Remus asks.

James feels himself flush. "Yeah," he says broodishly. "I could."

"The amount of times he got you with that cutting spell of his," Remus starts.

"Well, maybe if you hadn't picked so many fights with him," Lily mutters.

James bristles. "We didn't start that rivalry!"

“Yes you did!” she shoots back, and then seems to cringe at herself. “We are not having this argument. *No*. We are not doing this.”

The thought of Snape’s ugly, white face has wormed its way past James’ frontal lobe, though, and right to his amygdala. He frowns hard and says, with no small amount of irritability, “Well, we’re not the ones who wrote a fucking letter to him.”

Lily sweeps halfway out of her chair and jabs a pale finger at him. “I’m not the one that stole a pile of Sirius’ diaries and got obsessed with whatever ‘the fourth’ is!”

“That’s different! At least I didn’t get caught.”

“Who says we’ll get caught?!”

“He’ll see me and scream for a teacher,” James scoffs. “He hates me more than he loves you.”

Lily reels back like she’s been slapped. Just as quickly, she seems to recover herself. “I guess I’ll just go without you, then!”

James frowns. “You need me to get into the common room.”

“I’ll lie.”

“The door will know.”

“Severus will let me in.”

“Will he?” James rolls his eyes. “*Hi, Sev, I’m here to kidnap a third-year--*”

“Bullstrode’s in fourth,” Remus corrects faintly, looking a bit sick.

Lily throws her hands in the air. "Unlike you," she snaps, "he might be able to let go of a childish teenage rivalry for one night, one night, James, and act civilly. But if you can't, then I suppose I'll have to go alone, won't I?"

"I can let it go just fine!" James yells. "You tell me all the time I've changed, where's that gone?!"

"Being too busy feeling sorry for yourself to bully him in fifth year wasn't changing, James!" Lily stalks across the kitchen and then rounds on him and paces right back. "*I can take him*, honestly, are you still eleven?"

"Oh, so you think he's more mature than me," James spits. "Him. A death eater. A Slytherin! He's a blood supremacist! He'd kill you if he--"

Lily's face crumples and the air seems to go out of her.

"Sorry," James says immediately, a bright, hot swell of guilt rising in him. "Sorry."

She collapses into a chair. Remus takes her arm, and she shakes her head, not looking at either of them.

"It's more complicated than that," she starts, and doesn't seem to believe the words herself. With fumbling hands, she pulls a sheaf of parchment from her pocket and thrusts it at James. He takes it and starts to read, pushing his glasses back up his nose.

Lily,

Are you safe? Are you okay? Where are you staying? Where have you been? Nobody at Hogwarts seems to know where you are. The Gryffindors won't tell me anything, but I suspect that some of them know more than they're letting

on. Meadows gave me your letter yesterday and said she'd take one back to you. How are you getting letters into Hogwarts? I thought they were reading them all. And why to her? She's bad news, Lily. You could have written directly to me; you should have.

None of that's important, though. Why do you want to get into the castle? And how can I help? You know I'd do anything for you, it doesn't matter if it's anything against the rules. I want to see you again. I need to see you again, actually. I can try to figure out a way to get you in. I could volunteer to patrol the grounds and get you inside on one of those nights. I'd do anything. Just let me know what you need.

It's terrible here without you. I know I've said it a million times before (though I presume none of my letters have been reaching you), but I'm sorry if I did anything that hurt you, I truly am. The idea of making you sad haunts me. I think of you all the time, in every quiet moment.

Please write back. I'm so glad you're safe. I missed you so much.

Severus.

"Ah, fuck," James says, and rubs his face.

Remus snatches the letter from it and scans it, chewing his mangled lower lip between wolfish teeth. By the time he's done, he looks like he feels even sicker, and hands it back to Lily, who tucks it gingerly into her pocket.

"Yeah," she says. "I know. I just... I think he might really be our only way in. Since we know there aren't any Gryffindors or PA members on the patrol squad. And... and he would have discretion. If it meant keeping me safe."

James bites back some very harsh words at that. "Right," he snorts, a little derisive.

"You might hate him," she sighs. "And he hates you. But... but he doesn't hate me enough to..." She trails off. "To get me killed or rat me out. Even if it's at your expense."

"It's been a year," James offers. "Almost. He could have changed. Maybe he's already told them. This could be bait."

"He might have hated you. He never hated me. He couldn't," Lily shoots back, a little desperate.

"You can't know that!"

"It's not like you took any time to get to know him!"

"Well, I--"

Remus raises a hand. Like he's in class. James goes silent and Lily follows and for a few seconds, it's like they've frozen in time.

"Stop, please," Remus says in a small voice. "I'm so tired of fighting. Can we just... not do this?"

James sinks low into his chair. "Sorry."

"Sorry," Lily mumbles in echo.

Remus nods, very pale. "We're all going," he says. "All three of us. Okay?"

"But--" James starts.

"I don't like him any more than you," Remus sighs. "But if Lily trusts him, we have to. It's our only chance at getting..."

getting answers. About the fourth. About Amelie. About whatever it was he was doing."

Lily gives a triumphant little nod. "He wouldn't rat us out," she says again, emphatically, and reaches out to take James' arm and squeeze it. "He's not like that. He can't... he's not. He wouldn't do that."

"You mean he wouldn't do that to you," James grumbles.

"You were his childhood bully. He'd probably have you killed thrice over if it wouldn't get me hurt," Lily admits. It seems to take effort. "But he won't... not if it might mean I get in the crossfire. He cares too much."

Remus considers that. "And you're sure?"

Lily nods. "I'm sure."

"Okay. Then it'll be all three of us."

James throws his hands in the air. He barely manages to bite back an argument. "Fine," he says. "Fine, you know what? Fine."

"I'm doing this because we care about him," Lily snaps. "All of this is Black's business, not mine. Don't freak out at me for trying to help you find him, or, or, or figure out his... his trail of clues, or whatever. It's not any of my business."

"It became your business when you joined this thing in the first place!"

Lily scowls properly, then, face going harsh with it. "Not everything in the world is about Sirius, James."

"That's what we named ourselves after, isn't it?!"

“And evidently it wasn’t enough, since we’ll be disbanded by summer!”

James lurches out of his seat. “I’m keeping it going. Even if both of you go. I still care about him enough.”

“James,” Remus starts, voice cracking.

“A one man army.” Lily half laughs at that. “Right. We’re a fucking mailing service, James. We’ve got no magic, we’ve got no money, we’re kids who’ve barely done anything. At least Remus and I want something that isn’t just him!”

“Who’s going to be the one dealing with all the bloody letters when you two have run off?!” James explodes. “Me!”

“The Order could put a squib on that,” Lily sneers. “They could put a *fucking* first-year on that.”

James has never heard her swear before. “You sound just like him sometimes, you know? Snivellus.”

“Don’t call him that--”

“Then don’t call Sirius ‘Black’!”

“I didn’t spend half my time in school making him want to die--”

“Yeah, ‘cause the Blacks were already doing that!”

“Stop!” Remus yells. “Stop it!” There are tears in his voice.

James doesn’t stop. “We’ll go to Hogwarts, then,” he snaps. “We’ll go, and if it goes wrong, I’ll never fucking forgive you, but since that doesn’t seem to matter to you--”

“Of course it matters to me!”

“THEN STAY!” James howls.

The room goes dead quiet. Wind whips against the window and James reaches up to feel his face and realises his cheeks are wet. He wipes at them furiously, feels his shoulders draw up around him like they’re not in his own control anymore. His body doesn’t feel like his.

“James,” Remus says.

“I’m going to sleep,” James cuts over him. “Stay here and plan. Or whatever.”

He starts for the door. The guilt of it crashes over him on the threshold into the hallway, though. The world lurches as he turns back to the kitchen. Remus and Lily are both staring at him.

James draws a deep breath. “I’m sorry,” he says. “I’m really sorry.”

Then, he heads for the bedroom without another word.

The following morning, they don’t talk about it. Remus sleeps in the kitchen and Lily cries when she thinks James is asleep. That distance of January stretches itself back between them like it never left. James goes on three delivery runs in one day, taking the train from Camden to Sutton and then out of London to Winchester. They were scheduled to be spotted out through the week, but he frankly doesn’t care. He just doesn’t want to sit in the awkward quiet.

Winchester is nice, though. Quiet and unassuming, full of dark trees and narrow back alleys. James finds the family

house he's looking for quickly, on the outskirts without a muggle mailing address or a postcode, and slots their kid's letter through the window. Hopefully it'll make their day, he thinks derisively, and starts the hike back up to the city centre, where the train station awaits.

The high street is quaint. It's got old muggle bars and pubs, and a handful of expensive-looking clothing stores. James spends the last of his muggle change on a sandwich for a homeless man and sits beside him for a break. His return ticket doesn't expire til ten pm, and frankly, he's going to make the most of the time not spent in the apartment in Lambeth.

The homeless man doesn't say much, just mumbles thanks and gets into the plastic packaging of his sandwich. James rests his elbows on his knees and watches the street. Winchester doesn't have much of a wizarding population, he's pretty sure. He should be safe to sit and think for a while.

Apologising is something he's been historically bad at. James is honestly quite proud of himself for managing it at all last night. But like it did at the beginning of the year, and through this awful month that's not even behind them yet, he knows this fight is going to hang over them unless he stops it from doing so. He just doesn't know if he's got the strength.

"Penny for them?" the man asks.

James shakes his head. "I'd be here all day."

When he eventually gets the strength to get up and make it the rest of the way to the train station, over a grassy null that lies alongside a road with the tracks stretching long on the other side, it's starting to get dark. James admires the

flower stand beside the station entrance and then wanders in, slashing his return ticket through the turnstile and ambling out onto the platform to wait for the next train.

When a train to the south-west pulls up, James steps on without even consciously thinking about it.

He takes a seat and stares out of the window as London draws further and further away. The rumble of the train under him sends him into a sort of trance and he almost falls asleep. An hour later, it pulls to a stop at the end of the line. He gets off at Bath and takes the next train to Bristol, hops a turnstile and rides up to Swindon, where he pounds on a vending machine until it drops a Mars bar, and chews on it, wandering the platforms like a ghost.

By that point, the sky is fully dark, and James lets the next train east take him to Newbury, where he gets off and considers his options, feet scuffing the concrete of the platform as air rushes down the tracks with the passing-through of freights, the rattling of their heavy rusted carriages ringing into the night. The trains won't run much later, he knows. Newbury isn't far west of London, but it isn't far south of Oxford, or Milton Keynes, or something. Anything.

He thinks of Remus' face, how his voice broke when they fought last night. And even that doesn't do it, honestly; but then James thinks of Sirius, who wouldn't leave his friends for a moment if he didn't have no other choice, and abruptly feels very guilty, and a bit stupid.

When the train to London pulls up to platform four, James steps on and rides right into Paddington. He falls asleep against the window and a conductor has to wake him up an hour later, when they're at the end of the line.

"Alright, chap?" the guy asks.

James nods, stifling a yawn. "The metro still running?"

"Dunno. Reckon not."

It's probably eleven or twelve by now. "Right," James says. "Thanks."

Paddington Station is about as deserted as it's going to get, only a few stragglers and tourists lingering. Florescent light beats down over James and he passes the metro entrance without trying it. He passes a handful of muggle tourists sitting on their suitcases. They grin at him and he smiles back.

The walk back to Lambeth is long but manageable. Down through central London and over one of the bridges. Not too bad. Nothing the Order can get on his back about, anyway, he thinks, as he cuts out of the station and into a sidestreet, swinging the cloak around himself and pulling the hood down low, casting the world into a silvery haze.

The train hopping hasn't helped, evidently. James hadn't thought it would.

When he gets back to the apartment, Remus and Lily are both still up, even though it's well past midnight, clutching mugs of tea and talking in low voices under the dim light in the kitchen. James makes a point to close the front door loudly behind him, and locks it.

"Where were you?" Lily calls, leaning back in her chair to look through the kitchen door at him. "We've been worried."

"Delivery in Winchester went long," James pulls out of his ass. "Couldn't find the place. Think it was, uh, fideliused. Or something."

Remus smiles tentatively at him. James smiles back, shouldering his jacket off and unlacing his boots.

"Sorry," he says, as soon as he's stepped into the kitchen.

Remus and Lily exchange glances.

"For last night," James clarifies. "It... it was my fault. I shouldn't have gotten so upset."

"No," Lily starts, "it's--"

"Honestly," James cuts over. "I mean it. Uh, you've done so much for us. And I don't... I don't believe half the shit I said last night. And I'm sorry, Remus. I know you care. I know that. I didn't... I didn't mean it."

Looking supremely uncomfortable, Remus shakes his head. "You don't need to apologise."

James drops into a chair. "I do," he sighs. "Is Mary around?"

"Sleeping," Lily says, a bit fretfully. "She's been sleeping a lot. I think she's alright. I should bring her some breakfast tomorrow..."

"Yeah," James encourages. "I can do that. Uh. I know you're busy."

Lily gives him a strange look. "I forgive you."

"I know."

"You don't have to win it from me."

James bites the inside of his cheek until it hurts. "I sort of do," he says. "Feels like I do, anyway. I dunno."

"Well. I promise you don't."

"The plan with Snape is good. We can do it."

Lily blinks. "Remus and I already started thinking of other ideas..."

"You said it yourself, it's the best plan we've got," James tells her. "I don't want to throw away an opportunity because... because I'm a bit of a shithead. We should go ahead with it."

"You're sure?"

"Yeah."

Lily nods slowly, then once again with a little more vigour. "Okay," she exclaims. "Then I'll write back to him and send it with the next ingoing delivery."

And that's that.

Pads,

You want the good news or the bad news first? Guess I get to pick. The bad news is that I fucked up severely; the good news is that I fixed it.

I'm writing this in the morning as opposed to before bed, so if it's short, that's why. I've got to help Lily write back to Snape, and then after that it's time to compile tips for the Friends for this week, before the Direct Action tonight. Do

you listen to those? Your friends did mail us through the Friends. That's confusing. But surely they must have heard that from the show, right? Anyway, I hope you do listen. There's never very much good news, but it helps us feel less alone. Does it help you, too?

Ayway, point of what I said earlier: I'm a colossal bloody ass, and I said a lot of stuff I didn't mean last night, but I pulled myself up by my bootstraps and I said sorry. You'd be proud of me for that, right? I'm taking your silence as a yes. I said sorry and I made things okay again. For now, at least. I think... I don't know. We can pretend for a bit longer.

Oh, I don't think I explained what I said earlier. I'm all jumbled. Head isn't working properly. I think I bonked it when I was out with Remus on the full. Lily and Snape are exchanging letters again. You heard me right. If you were here, you'd take my side and tell them it's a terrible idea, but you're not, and I can't have that argument with them right now, so I've agreed to it. Apparently he can get us into the castle to speak with Bullstrode.

I don't know how to feel about it. The idea of seeing him again, the idea of him seeing Lily again. The idea of discovering what you left behind, I think. Whatever you left in Hogwarts, I know it was bad, I can just sort of feel it. There's stuff Remus still doesn't tell me about that time. I worry what it does to him to keep it all secret. I worry about secrets a lot. I worry a lot.

This has gotten morbid fast, huh? Time to go!

Yours,

Prongs.

Lily's letter back to Snape goes out, and the days following are still tense, but lessening as time goes by. James makes dinner most days, mostly to keep himself from wandering off into London and staying out all night. Lily handles letters, perhaps as an apology. Remus sleeps mostly, wiped out by the full, trying to keep the gashes along his jaw from getting infected.

"They'll stick," he tells James blandly, one evening, as they lie together writing to Sirius like they used to in the camp bed back in Wales. "These, I mean. They'll scar."

"Oh," James says.

"Yeah."

"That sucks," James sighs. "Got enough of those."

"What's a few more?"

"You'll be more scar than person by the time all this is over."

Remus pauses in his writing. Then he starts again, and James watches him scribble a goodbye, and then his name. Then, he puts the letter down and leans over and kisses James, not hard, not gently either. Like it's normal. Like there's nothing painful between them.

James kisses him back. They lie like that for some time, hands on each other but not moving. Quiet and very nearly still.

When Remus pulls away, there's a strange look on his face.

"Tell me," James murmurs.

"I worry it'll never be over," Remus starts, and then carries on like he's reading off a shopping list. "I worry it'll be forever. I worry he'll die before we see him again. I worry he's already dead. I worry you're..."

"I'm what?"

Remus shrugs. Then, he kisses him again.

"I don't remember," he says, when he pulls away. "What I was going to say."

"You worry I love him more than you."

"Sometimes," Remus admits.

James shrugs. "I don't."

"I know."

"Ever."

"I know." Remus shakes his head. "We should sleep."

Neither of them sleeps.

The following morning, Lily gets a letter back from Snape.

Lily, it reads.

I've requested to be added to the rotation of students on patrol. It's mostly to watch for centaurs and half-breeds along the border of the forest, though it includes runaways, too. We've had a few half-bloods try to leave in the night.

I don't know that they'll accept me, but I have high hopes; my grades have been exceptional lately. Have you been keeping up with schoolwork? Knowing you, you have been. I miss seeing you in classes. I miss studying with you. Ever since your first letter arrived, all I can think of is you. You consume my thoughts. I worry about you. I know it can be dangerous out there. I wish you'd come back for this term.

I'll write back as soon as I know whether they'll let me on patrol. If they do, I can let you onto the grounds through the forest; you'd have to come down through the mountains, they're watching Hogsmede, too. Whatever you need, I'll do it. At the end of the day, it's you and me, right? Over any of them. It always has been.

I love you.

Severus.

"Have you been keeping up with your schoolwork, he asks," Lily sighs, taking the letter back from James to pass it over to Remus. "Like this isn't a war."

"He doesn't seem to know how bad it is," James confirms, and almost succeeds in keeping from sounding resentful.

Remus looks up from the letter. "We're in, then."

Lily nods. "I told him we want in before the end of February. So we can, uh, sort our affairs before we..." She trails off, glancing askance at James.

James nods. "Yeah. Sounds good." He's determined to keep his head today.

Remus reaches over to squeeze his hand. "This is good," he says, like he's trying to convince all of them. "This is good."

We can question her, we can... we can catch up with the Gryffindors. We can see Pete!"

"If it's not too dangerous," Lily expells, but she's nodding.

James thinks of Peter and forces a grin. "Bet he's been making hell for them," he says. "I can't wait to see his face again."

Remus smiles indulgently. "We can get the gist of what's really going on in there." Then, he hesitates. "I think we should tell the Order."

"What?" Lily and James ask.

"I think," Remus says, glancing at Lily now with that slightly afraid look. "I think, just in case something goes wrong and Snape can't get us out of the castle, I mean. I think... somebody should make us a portkey. Timed portkeys work on Hogwarts grounds. I've checked. Uh, so long as they're charmed off site. We can get somebody to charm it to take us back home at dawn. So even if things go wrong..."

"That's a fantastic idea," James says immediately, fiercely. "Yeah. Let's do that."

Lily shakes her head. "I know you don't trust him--"

"It's just a failsafe," Remus says quickly.

She puts up a hand. "I know. But what do you think the Order will say if we go to them with that? We're already breaking house arrest every other day, all of us. They'll put us under lock and key. No way they'll help."

"I've got it," James exclaims. "We can get one of the Friends to do it! They can go to Order HQ and... and conjure it for

us!"

Lily shakes her head. "They wouldn't keep that secret for us, no way. They don't value their alliance with us over their alliance with the Order, James."

"I could do it," Remus pipes up.

They both turn to stare. "What?" James asks.

"I could do it," Remus repeats. "Uh. The portkey, I mean. It hadn't... occurred to me, but... they want me at Order meetings in February, right? I'll be going to the next one. I can sneak off to a bathroom, make the portkey one of my shoes or something. The Trace won't pick it up from in there, and nobody will have to know."

"It's tricky magic," Lily warns. "I can teach you the incantation, though."

Remus smiles tentatively. "That works way better."

James chews his lip. "The Order's gonna find out eventually, though."

"Yeah, but by then, we'll all be of age," Lily justifies. "And you'll be... and Remus..." She trails off again. "We'll all be out of..."

"Yeah," James says, perhaps too forcefully. "Yeah, you're right. Sorry."

"I think this might actually work," she carries on, then, clearing her throat. "You know, I think we might actually do this."

There's a small cough from the kitchen doorway, and they all jump. In a pair of Remus' sweatpants and a knitted jumper, Mary stares at them all with big, tired eyes.

"What's going on?" she asks. "What are you planning?"

Lily and James and Remus all look at each other. "Uh," Lily says.

"Is it a secret thing?"

"No," Remus says quickly. "No, not... not exactly."

"We're sneaking into Hogwarts," James speaks up. Lily kicks him under the table. "At the end of next month."

Mary's big eyes go wider. She stares right at him for an almost uncomfortably long time. James wonders whether she's going to start crying or something. He hopes not. He's had enough of tears.

Then, Mary clears her throat. "I'm coming with you."

"Excuse me?" Lily asks.

"You can't," Remus says.

"What?" James exclaims.

All of them speak at the same time. It comes out in a bit of a jumble.

Mary keeps staring. She looks sort of faraway, like she might float off through the wall like a ghost. She staggers, one bare foot after the other, to a chair and sits.

"I'm coming with you," she says again. "I promised Marlene-Dorcas. I have to."

James stares at the table, chewing his lip. He's determined to let Lily take this one.

But even she doesn't seem to know quite what to say. "Mary..." she sighs. "Dorcas... Dorcas is okay. Really. We've been in contact-- you've been in contact--"

Mary shakes her head. "I just have to talk to her," she pleads. "Even if I can't get her out of there. Please. I-- I have to."

"Mary..." Remus starts.

"We should let her," James puts in. All three of them turn stare at him. "I know how it feels. Remus, too. You should... you should be able to talk to her."

Mary beams at him. She still looks quite ill, dark skin sort of gummy under the gold light. "I'll... I'll help. I won't get in the way. I promise. What are we going for? What are we going to get? What's the plan?"

"James--" Lily starts, a little harshly. Then, she glances at Mary and seems to give up. "Okay" she sighs. "Alright. Fine."

Mary lunges across to hug her, and then hugs James, too, and then Remus, seemingly for good measure. "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you."

For the first time since James saw her at Hogwarts, she looks happy, truly happy. Hurt, and scared, still, always scared, but happy.

He supposes that makes it worth it.

"Guess it rests on him," Remus murmurs to James that night, as they fall asleep, one body, not in separate blankets like they used to be. "Doesn't it?"

"Rests on me, in a sense," James admits. "How much of a shit I was to him."

"Don't think like that."

"It's true."

Remus takes him by the face and kisses him once more. James tastes stitches.

Chapter End Notes

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TEMPORALITY

Chapter Notes

twos: some pretty heavy gore/injury, violence, discussion of trauma, ptsd symptoms, mental illness.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Pain is like this: your spinal cord sends electricity up through your nervous system to the synapses in your brain, which fire off neurotransmitters to the thalamus, which tells you that something is wrong. There are even more steps to it than that, making the whole process determinedly not very failsafe. Something must be going wrong in there right now, Sirius thinks, because he can't feel a fucking thing; not pain, certainly.

The matagot gouges its claws into his back and its teeth dig deeper into the meat of his shoulder; its canines scrape bone. With a snarl, it tears its head back, carving thick gashes. Sirius shakes his right arm once and thinks, Riddle, Riddle, Riddle, and a burst of heat surges out of him, rattling him with it, sweeps out through the air, so hot and quick that the walls of the shack shake and smoke. The matagot hits the ground, yowling. Its jaw drips scarlet with blood. Sirius kicks it and it scatters away and hits a wall, claws scoring on the rotting floorboards.

Matagots are cute in a theoretical sense, dark skin and thin fur, sort of like hairless cats. They've got large, pale eyes, and knobbly thin bodies with hipbones that jut out to their sides, and they can bite hard enough to tear into an artery, large teeth protruding so far from their gums that Sirius can see the pink flesh there ripping under the pressure.

Just as quickly, then, another of the beasts is onto him. It snarls and pounces from the far corner and Sirius wrangles his arm up in his left hand, holding it like a gun in front of him. He doesn't muster the concentration in time and the matagot is onto him, lunging across the floor and sinking sharp fangs into his calf, and still Sirius feels nothing as he lets out a shout and stamps his foot down on its leg and then its neck and then its head once, twice, thrice. The cat-like thing manages to siphon off across the floor, growling and limping, and it circles the outer edge of the room, eyes boring into him. Sirius growls right back at it. His blood pumps loud and heavy in his head.

They're resistant to spells, Claude had said, but go for it, if you think it'll help. And so Sirius goes for it.

The beast lunges again, right at his blind spot, three o'clock. Sirius pivots on his heel and imagines the rotting floorboards are dark, plush carpets, imagines the dark walls are thick with tapestry. He feels his arm spasm in his hand, lurching out against his grip. The skin surges with heat and the matagot skitters backwards, alarmed, seeming to know there is rotten magic in the air, in this room, poisoning the both of them.

Sirius shouts, wordless, he thinks, or maybe not. He can't tell. The rafters surge and shudder and the floor licks upwards, creaking with fissures, spitting up mud and dust. Shrieking, the matagot lurches against the wall and slams into it three times in quick succession, compelled by unknown force. Sirius hears each of its bones break; it hits the ground in a dark, translucent heap. Eager like puppies, the walls curl in towards him, seeming to ask, who next? who next? Hot magic curls in the air around him. Light leaches from the sky outside. The world howls like a wolf.

"Shut up!" Sirius bellows at his arm, to shut it up.

The heat dies and his skin goes cold, perhaps in retribution, icy enough to sear. The matagot is dead. The wind against the walls silences and Sirius pants hard and lets his arm drop from his grip, sagging.

"That's all of them, I think?" he calls, hoarse.

Outside, there's a sharp grunt in reply. "Bag them, if you will," Claude shouts back. "Are you hurt?"

Sirius takes stock. He's bleeding from the shoulder and leg but he still can't really feel the pain of it, and he doesn't think he'll pass out. "I'm good."

"Bonne fille," Claude calls in response.

Sirius straightens up, shaking his arm out as if to scold it. He fishes with his left hand into the inside pocket of his jacket, pulls out a handful of black plastic bags, and begins piling the dead matagots into them, crouching hunched like a beggar to pick them up. Outside, the night is quiet and still. Herzegovina is warmer by night than Iceland, but there's still a bite on the air. Spring has yet to arrive.

By the time he's done, Sirius has three black bin bags full of dead cat and an aching back. He lugs his tidings outside of the hut where the lot of them had made their nest, to Claude, who is standing over half a dozen of their own bags, counting out the loot.

"Thought you said you weren't hurt?" they ask over their shoulder, without looking around.

Sirius dumps his bags beside theirs. Moonlight casts streaks of dulled silver over the plastic creases. "I'm not.

Doesn't even need stitches, I don't think."

Claude nudges his shoulder with a faint laugh. "Then why are you limping? No time for weakness in times like these."

Sirius shoves them right back. "I like to worry you."

"I'd picked up on it." Claude tucks their knife back into the strap along their back and turns to Sirius, looking him up and down critically. "How did it go?"

"I could control it a bit better now," Sirius says, without optimism. "It listened to me a bit more than last time. Not going to cause an earthquake again, like in, uh, the Sinai Peninsula."

"I should hope not. The statute would not be happy with us." Claude messes up his hair with a large hand. "Well done."

Their praise isn't rare, nor is it hard to come by, but Sirius still feels himself glow with it. He wipes a splatter of blood off his cheek with the back of his hand to try to hide his grin.

Claude snorts again, seeing right through him. "Come. Apparition point isn't too far off. You should tell me about your week."

They take most of the bags. Sirius is still woefully weak compared to Claude (that's what a year in captivity will do to you, he supposes, and just as long as that living on Yí'ān's cooking and Galina's choice in takeaway), and things like levitation charms are way out of his reach at this point, so Claude takes the bulk of them, Sirius struggling along beside them with one slung over each of his shoulders, while they balance six or seven.

"It's been okay," Sirius says, as they reach the path and start back through the forest to the road. The black sky yawps overhead. "Yí'ān told me to tell you he said hi. He wants to catch up sometime. Reckons you spend more time with me than him these days."

"Well, he would be correct about that," Claude replies. "What's he been spending his time doing? Same nonsense as usual, I suppose."

"Things are getting worse out there, he says," Sirius parrots. "They've been getting more distress calls than ever."

"He worries you needlessly."

"You don't agree?"

Claude shakes their head. "I just think you worry too much, Black."

"Ha," Sirius says, without humour.

"I would call him paranoid, but... we've seen it too, on my side of the business. They've restricted substance trading into Britain. It all goes through the Ministry now."

Sirius nods. "I heard on *Direct Action*. Uh, radio show."

"It's a shitty name."

"I know."

"Shitty name aside, they're right about that. We don't know the details, or why now, but we suppose it's because British insurgents have been playing the fash at their own game. Using imports to fight back."

"Death eaters," Sirius corrects absently. "That's what they call themselves."

Claude grins into the dark. "Seriously?"

"It's a shitty name."

"I could have told you that." They shrug. "You don't have to call them what they call themselves. Gives them less power if you don't. The amount of these people we've had to face out here over the years, you wouldn't believe. But I don't remember half of their names. They are all the same man, they wear different faces."

Sirius considers that. "I don't think Riddle could be like anybody else," he says.

"Riddle?"

"Guy who leads them. Guy who..." Sirius trails off.

"I see," Claude replies very neutrally.

They sink into quiet for a while. Sirius crunches over dried leaves and twigs, watching the dark earth consume his footprints. It's damp down in southern Europe tonight. It must have been raining. Good; it means they'll leave no trace.

"Have you been going with him on any of his calls, then?" Claude asks.

"Uh," Sirius says. "Sometimes, yeah. When he thinks it won't be dangerous. I keep trying to tell him I can handle myself. Don't think he believes me."

"I see. He should have more faith in you."

"You should tell him that!" Sirius exclaims, and throws out his arm to illustrate his point. A nearby tree rattles with impact, creaking at the roots. "See? I'm strong."

"I'm sure you can convince him," Claude says, and the lines around their eyes crinkle. They adjust the bags laden across their shoulders and over their arms. One of them must have a hole in it; there's blood spotting down to the ground in even-tempered droplets, landing near their heavy boots.

"I hope so," Sirius sighs.

"What's your plan?"

"What do you mean?"

"In the long term," Claude clarifies. "What do you want to do?"

Sirius sort of panics at that. He feels his chest go tight.

"Uh," he says. "I've got a few ideas. I dunno."

"Well, I'm not about to convince you to go back to fair England, so you don't need to worry," Claude reassures, seeming sort of amused. "If you want to spend the next few years running this circuit, go right ahead. Always eager for good help."

The thought of doing this for a while is a comfort. Sirius knows, in the logical bit of his head, that comforts bite worse than fears most of the time, and that security is an illusion which vanishes whenever it feels inclined, but the dog is the dog, and if nothing else, its loyalty is fickle.

"I'll remember that," he says, in lieu of saying anything else. "Thanks, Claude."

“No need for thanks. Only that arm and your wits.”

“Right. Well, those aren’t going anywhere.” Sirius kicks at a stone, shoulders aching. “When’s our next job, then?”

“Not for a few weeks,” Claude says, as if that isn’t a bombshell. “There have been conflicts in France. Group of Brits trying to smuggle their magic over the border. I’ve been requested to... manage the conflict.”

Sirius almost switches to English, but manages to wrangle himself into the right French words, forcing his tongue around them. “How long?”

“Until March, perhaps longer.”

“Can I come with you?”

Claude shakes their head resolutely, as if they haven’t even thought about it. “It’s dangerous on the border,” they explain. “Nasty stuff. We’ve had murders; somebody tried to assassinate the French Minister the other day. Very nearly succeeded. Left just a bit of his neck still hanging on.”

“Oh,” Sirius says.

“As much faith as I have in you, I think we should give it a few months before you come with me on hunts like that.” They reach over to clap his shoulder hard, and then their piercing black gaze fixes him. “Hunting humans is quite a lot different from hunting beasts, no?”

“I could still come,” Sirius grumbles. “Yí’ān never lets me fight when I go on jobs with him.”

“And you crave a fight that badly?”

“Yes,” Sirius says immediately. “Getting angry is the only way I can... I dunno. I don’t like letting this thing—” (he flops his arm around, a bit like a dead fish) “—control me. I can control it when I’m angry.”

“I see.” Claude shrugs, though there’s heaviness in it. “It’ll go quickly. I promise. At least you’re not sleeping on the beach anymore.”

“Small wonders,” Sirius mutters.

They’ve reached the apparition point by now, a silver stake which sticks out of the dark earth through a gap in the trees. Bright moonlight glows over them. Claude takes Sirius’ bags from him and disappears with a crack, appearing again a moment later with their hands empty and their shoulders boxy and broad again, not weighed down by anything. That elicits a surge of envy, which Sirius determinedly ignores.

“Are you alright to get yourself home on your own?” they ask, wiping their hands on their jacket. “I can sidealong, if needed.”

“I’ll try it on my own,” Sirius says, with more optimism than he actually feels. “I did it alright last time.”

“You left two fingers in Gjirrokaster.”

“You brought them back to me,” Sirius defends, perhaps a bit sourly. “It’s... temperamental, but I can do it.”

“Right,” Claude says, very amused. “I’ll stay here and make sure you leave nothing behind. Reykjavik?”

“Reykjavik,” Sirius confirms. He gives Claude a quick hug. They smack his back a couple of times, and Sirius pulls

away and smiles. "Bye."

"See you soon," Claude promises.

And that's that. This bit takes some concentration; Sirius concentrates hard, picturing his father's great ugly face in his mind. His fist twitches eagerly, cries, *kill, kill, kill*. He closes his eyes tight and disappears on the spot.

A crack. The sensation of being pushed through a very narrow, very tight gap. Sirius gasps in a lungful of cold air and opens his eyes, standing on the grass outside their apartment block in Iceland.

He takes stock. All of him is still here, he thinks, even all his hair. Grinning to himself and trying to dispel his father's visage from his mind, Sirius sets off inside.

Jamie,

Writings still hard. More hunting. Claude's gone off somewhere. Love you.

Getting there!

- S.O.B

"Come, you," Galina says the following morning, shaking Sirius awake at six in the morning. "Work time."

"Still not too late for me to go back to Britain," Sirius groans.

"No rest for the wicked," she contends. "Up, up. We need to be in Trois-Rivières in twenty minutes."

Sirius sits up, yawning and rubbing his eyes with his left hand. "We're going to Canada?"

"Quebec."

"Yeah, I know that."

Galina nudges him along the sofa to sit beside him and lace up her boots. "That's why I need you. French."

"Ah." Sirius gets up. "Just let me brush my teeth first..."

They make it to Trois-Rivières before six-thirty. It's still pitch black there, nighttime casting the city into dark shadow, and the black sky overhead yields bright patches of stars. They land beside a long stretch of river, wide and dark with lights twinkling gold on the other side. It's very cold.

"Come," Galina commands more than instructs. She starts off down the walkway and Sirius jogs to keep up; she's shorter than him but walks faster, with a long stride like Remus.

"Where are we going? What's the plan?" Sirius asks, blood pumping. The dog says, yes, yes, yes.

"A basement in the centre of the city," Galina says promptly. "Across the bridge ahead. There's been an explosion."

"Targeted?"

"We don't think so. Certainly magical. There will be muggles who need obliterating, and damage to be fixed..."

"Can't the Canadian magical authorities do that?" Sirius asks, confused.

Galina sighs. "If we lived in a rational world, perhaps. Currently, there are four Canadian magical governments."

"Oh. Well, the more the merrier?"

"None of them operate in Quebec," Galina says, with a touch of irony.

"What? Language barrier?"

"There have been three blood purist uprisings in the region in the past ten years. Suppose they've given up."

"Oh," Sirius says.

"Indeed. We get far less distress calls in Ontario, as I'm sure you can imagine."

"Right." Sirius jogs a few paces to catch up again as they round onto a long bridge, mostly deserted, which stretches high over the dark waters. "So it's our job to clean it up?"

"The *fasistar* aren't going to clean it up themselves," Galina justifies. "*Facho*, I suppose. French."

"The fact that it isn't proper decorum to be dressed up and down with translation spells all the time in this business is a crime," Sirius mutters. He's fluent in English, and decent at French, and he's picked up on a good amount of Icelandic and Norwegian and a bit of Ukrainian, though he's hopeless at Cyrillic. It doesn't feel like nearly enough.

"We used to use magic to translate a lot more," Galina says. She sounds oddly wistful. When Sirius glances at her, she's staring out over the river, an indiscernible look on her face. "During the war, especially."

“Why did you stop?”

She glances at him, expression going grim. “Mistranslations get people killed. That’s the thing about language.” She laughs. “There are certain questions that don’t allow peaceful answers if you ask them the wrong way.”

Sirius thinks about that, nodding even though he doesn’t get it. They walk the rest of the way across the metal bridge in silence, the only sounds on the air the ripple of the river under them as it carries dark waves out to sea. Ahead, Trois-Rivières sits in tones of grey and gold, most lights off, a few left on. Streetlamps glow over the metal railings of the bridge, reflecting in harsh neon lines like the lights at the nightclub did.

Back on the streets, Galina leads Sirius up a main road, not slowing for a moment even as she peers around. She walks with square shoulders and a hardy sort of swagger, like anything could come flying at her and she’d bat it away. Sirius tries to imitate that and imagines he’s succeeding.

A half mile into the city, she grabs him by the sleeve and pulls Sirius off down a deserted side street. The whole place feels like a ghost town. Sirius hasn’t seen a single person yet. He wonders whether the muggles who live here know that they’re sort of living in the midst of a war. He wonders if the muggles back home have figured it out yet, either.

When the smell of smoke hits him, Sirius falters. “We’re close to it.”

“I know,” Galina says in a tight voice. “Stick close to me.”

They walk swiftly and silently down a gap between high, grey buildings, and out onto another street. Galina pulls him across the road to avoid the glare of a streetlamp, and

Sirius obligest, heart very tight under his ribs. Then, she pulls him down a gap between two houses and over a collapsed fence, thick with brambles, and onto a stretch of dry grass leading to a strip of concrete.

Galina puts a finger to her lips. Sirius ducks his head low and nods. They cut across the grass together. Up ahead, a dark, square building looms. Smoke rises from its rooftop. Out of the way of the streetlights, it's almost impossible to see.

Sirius staggers over something, stumbling blind across the grass. When he looks back, squinting, he thinks he can make out a human body, collapsed there.

Galina curses very quietly. With the clinicality of a bred soldier, she kneels beside the body and feels for a pulse. "Stunned," she murmurs, and then waves her wand. "Muggle."

"Are there more?" Sirius murmurs, glancing around. He transforms, letting his eyes adjust, and then shifts back. "Four others. To the right."

Galina shuffles over to check them, too. "None dead."

"Thank Merlin."

She clambers to her feet. "I suppose they haven't been obliviated," she murmurs. "Come on."

Sirius follows her lead across the rest of the stretch of dry grass, then onto the hard grey concrete. Ahead, he can see how that the building is a warehouse, with high, square gaps in the cladding for windows, and poor-looking insulation. There's a rectangular gap set into the front where the door should be. It looks like it's been blown off.

"Stay behind me," Galina whispers. She pads to the doorway and peers inside, tucking Sirius against the wall behind her. For a long moment, she stays very still.

Then, she gestures with a hand for him to follow her inside.

Sirius tiptoes in behind Galina as she crosses the threshold. It's so dark inside that he might as well have his eyes closed. He considers transforming but puts it off. They both hover there for a while, just inside. Listening for breathing.

Then, in the back, there's a very soft groan. It rattles faintly over the echoey walls. "You're the Nordic ones?"

"Lumos," Galina murmurs. A ball of light weans from the end of her wand and flutters up to the ceiling, flooding the room with light.

The warehouse is a mess. The walls are black with soot and scorch marks, and smoke still rises from the torn floor. There might have once been wooden crates in here, but now it's all just shards of charred wood, which litter the ground. The explosion appears to have come from the centre of the room, which is a blackened pit, the ground there still glowing faintly with heat.

There's a man crumpled in the far corner, holding his guts in. They pulse against his blackened fingers.

"Help me," he groans.

Galina moves across the room more quickly than Sirius has ever seen her move. She dodges around the hot burial ground of the explosion, right in the centre, and kneels beside the stranger. "English?" she asks.

"Not good."

"Hvolpur," Galina calls over her shoulder, and Sirius realises she's calling to him as if he's hearing it from another room. "Come."

The canine appreciates the command. Sirius staggers across the wreckage to her side and falls more than lowers himself to his knees.

"Tell him to take his hands away from his stomach, I need to get to the wound," Galina commands.

"Take your, uh, hands away," Sirius says in French, staring at the blood and torn-up skin, stomach churning. "From the wound. Please."

The Québécois man groans and obeys. "I told them we shouldn't have moved that stock here," he rambles to Sirius around a torn throat, more Canadian than any French Sirius has ever heard. "Not all of it, at least. They didn't listen to me."

Galina yanks up the man's shredded shirt with firm, unabashed hands. His stomach has been ripped open by the explosion, charred and bloody, and Sirius can see the rippling gasp of his organs tight against the stringy remains of his flesh, straining out under his ribs, which lie whitish yellow in the mess.

"Oh, fuck," he says in English, and switches back to French. "What stock were you keeping here?"

"Those—" The man gasps with pain, throat seeming to come apart with it. *"Ostie. Putain de bordel de merde."*

"You're okay," Sirius tries to reassure, sounding an edge too frantic himself. "We're going to fix you up just fine. Just tell me what happened."

"Those fucking mushrooms," the man tells him. A spot of blood curls over his lip and Sirius watches it make its descent over his chin, leaving a dark trail. "They were going to sell them down over the border. They kept them here. I told them not to. I did. They didn't listen."

"Ask him where his colleagues are," Galina instructs.

"Where are, uh, your," Sirius starts. He scrambles for the word for 'colleagues' and ends up settling on, "friends?"

"Hunting the muggles who saw. To obliviate."

"Are you *facho*?" Sirius asks.

The man squints. "What?"

"*Fasciste*. Uh. Muggle hate?"

"No," the man says quickly. "No. Only traders. We stay out of the blood fights."

"Good," Sirius says. "Good. Okay. When they return, will they heal you? You'll need muggle hospital."

"*Un pas de magie*— ugh!" He half shouts with pain as Galina waves her wand and begins to suture the wound shut. The awful smell of burning flesh fills the air. Heat ripples from the wound up towards the ceiling. Sirius gags right inside his throat.

"Almost done," Galina says grimly. "Keep him distracted."

Sirius grabs the man's flailing hand in his left. "Which mushrooms?" he asks desperately. "Where did you get them?"

“Harvested in Nunavut,” the man gasps, frantic and half-sobbing. His grip on Sirius’ hand is tight enough to bruise. “Bursting mushrooms. They were meant to go to American buyers. But too many of them together and they—”

“Explode,” Sirius finishes, heart sinking. From the corner of his eye, he watches Galina melt the man’s small intestine back into one piece. “Right.”

“I don’t want to die.”

“I know,” Sirius soothes. He wipes his face in the fabric inside his elbow. He can’t tell if he’s sweating with the heat or crying with the panic. “You won’t die. We’re halfway done fixing you already. The muggles, they’ll fix you, if magic can’t.”

“It’ll have to be enough to stop the bleeding for now,” Galina tells Sirius in Icelandic, so the man can’t listen in. “Keep him calm.”

“*Ég mun*,” Sirius confirms. His heart is so high in his throat that he can taste its beating. “I’d never been to Quebec before. I learned French from my family. England.”

The man bites his tongue so hard it begins to bleed. Sirius watches blood and spittle track in lines from the corners of his lips. “Never been to England,” he groans.

“It’s shit. Don’t go.”

“Ha.” He screams again.

Sirius extracts his hand and sits down in the wreckage, throwing his hands over his ears. Galina doesn’t flinch away or cease her ministrations; Sirius watches her knit together flesh and bone, tucking blood in thickets between arteries

like the loose end of a string of crochet yarn. Her face is hard and unafraid. She's chewing her lip incessantly.

When the man passes out, eyes rolling into his skull, his face goes slack. Sirius chews on one of his knuckles and suppresses the urge to transform. He can't drag his eyes away from it; Galina fixing, the man breaking, the both of them in some awful parody of humanity.

"Fuck," Sirius murmurs. "Shit."

"He'll live," Galina says shortly. "I've healed worse. Don't worry."

"Fuck," Sirius says again.

"I know." She doesn't touch him or even look at him, but Sirius has that sickly sort of feeling you might get when hugged at a funeral. "I know."

Jamie,

Bad job today. No anger left to use. Writing with left hand is unreadable. Tried.

Fuck. Fuck. Ow! Getting there. More words each time.

- S.O.B

"I want a tattoo," Sirius tells Yí'ān, when they've finished their next job.

Yí'ān turns to stare at him, raising an eyebrow. They're standing together on a high street in Nyíregyháza, and Yí'ān has a smear of black blood on the end of his nose, and

Sirius stinks of sewer. They've spent the last eight hours staking out an underground potions lab run by Hungarian magical weapons manufacturers to a fringe group of violent Malcan blood purists who Galina is hunting down. They're both weak with exhaustion.

"What?" Yí'ān asks, after a second or two.

"I want a tattoo," Sirius says again. He points to his left forearm. "Can I get one?"

"You want a tattoo," Yí'ān repeats. "Uh. A tattoo of what?"

Sirius hadn't really thought about that bit. "I dunno. I'll see what they've got."

"Who's going to pay for this?"

"You. I did just spend all day in the sewers with you."

"Because that's your job," Yí'ān sighs.

"I just..." Sirius hesitates, trying to word himself right. "I want to feel a bit more in control. Of uh." He gestures up and down himself vaguely. "You know."

"I see."

"Please? I'll pay you back."

Yí'ān shakes his head, half laughing, and Sirius knows then that he won't say no. "You know what? Fine. Come on, let's find a place." He slings an arm around Sirius' shoulders and they wander off down the pavement to find a tattoo parlour.

The place they find looks seedy but good enough, Sirius supposes, for two foreigners who smell like shit and don't

look much better. The staff don't speak English, so they negotiate price mostly through gesture. Sirius ends up getting pre-made design, a thick-lined illustration of a pocket knife, serrated along the edge. Neither he nor Yí'ān speaks Hungarian at all, so he doesn't know what it means.

"It looks cool, though," Yí'ān says, leaning back in his seat and watching the tattoo artist scatter his needle over Sirius' white arm. The veins strain towards the surface of his skin, as if they would like to mingle with the ink.

"Does it?" Sirius asks faintly. Like in Herzegovina, he can't feel a fucking thing. "That's good."

"I put words, if you want," the tattoo artist speaks up. "English?"

"Uh," Sirius says. "Like, under?"

The artist nods, drawing a line beneath the outline of the design where the script might be.

"Uh." Sirius shrugs. "Yeah, sure. Go for it. You can put it in Hungarian if you want."

"Words?"

"Um. Whatever you want."

"You sure about that?" Yí'ān asks, sounding very amused. "We can write something down if you want. Something sentimental. About James or something."

"Nah," Sirius says, trying not to think about him. "I like a surprise. Not like we know many Hungarians, do we? Nobody will know what it says, anyway."

"Right. Sure. Go for it, then."

'AMIT CSAK AKARSZ', the knife's underbelly says once it's done, the words lying like a shadow under the blade's edge. Sirius has no idea what they mean, but they look cool. He spends ages just staring at the tattoo, at its thick black lines, as if they'll leave if he doesn't pay enough attention to them. He flexes his arm over and over and relishes in the ripple of ink over bone.

They bandage him up soon enough, though, and Yí'ān pays with only a handful of complaints. He and Sirius leave and carry on through the city to their apparition point in comfortable quiet, Sirius stopping every few seconds to marvel down at his bandaged arm.

"Not regretting that?" Yí'ān asks fondly.

"Nah," Sirius responds. The grin on his face hurts a bit.

"Nah, it's great. I want more."

"Well, next time, get Claude to pay for them."

"They already agreed to fix my hair," Sirius says eagerly.

Yí'ān snorts. "They'll make you look like a right princess. Come, you. Let's get home."

Jamie,

Got a tattoo! Knife. Galina says it says 'whatever you want' in Hungarian. Yí'ān thinks it's so funny. Looks cool though.

Love you.

- S.O.B

In the early morning, Sirius wakes. It's still dark outside. His arm thrums with pressure under the bandages, as if the knife is trying to claw its way out from between them. He stares at the black ceiling as the world comes into focus around him and breathes steadily, listening for movement. Oddly, there's none. Usually, at this time of night, at least one of them is on comms or they're talking quietly over tea or liquor at the kitchen table. The apartment is silent, though. Sirius can't even hear birds.

Gingerly, he swings his legs over the side of the sofa and stands up. Maybe he should get some water or something, he thinks, and maybe he can use it as an excuse to untie the bandages around his wrist and peek at his new knife. Untying them with his right hand will be hard. Perhaps he can do it with his teeth.

Sirius is halfway to a standing position when he hears somebody come in through the front door and pauses, half-crouched, listening. Probably Galina, he thinks. Maybe she went out on a call late and didn't want to wake either of them, or she might have gone for a smoke, like she often does by night.

Whoever it is, they're moving softly, on quiet feet. Trying not to wake anyone. Sirius strains his ears and listens hard, trying to decipher whether it's Galina's sure, heavy footfall or Yí'ān's clumsier, more uneven tread. He's not sure.

Then, he hears it; something light and thin is dragging on the floor. Sirius goes very still, listening hard. It's like fabric, like robes. Neither Galina nor Yí'ān wears robes.

He should run, Sirius knows, then, as well as he knows anything else. He knows the sky is blue, and he knows he's

going to die one of these days, and he knows he should run, now, while he still can. Whatever it is that's out there, it wants to kill him. Cold terror rushes through him, half adrenaline, mostly adrenaline, actually. Mostly adrenaline, and still, he can't move. He just stands there, very still, barely breathing.

The footsteps draw close to the living room door. Every minute Sirius isn't running, he's swinging closer to death, the great jaws of it opening before him. He stares into the door as if he can weld it shut. The robes draw closer. Closer.

His hand doesn't twitch, doesn't even tense. Kill, Sirius tries to tell it. Kill, kill, kill.

But it doesn't respond to fear, only anger. And fear is about the only thing in his system right now.

Then, sound. Very slowly, with a sharp, low creak, the door handle turns downwards. Sirius stumbles and collapses back against the sofa, scrambling against the arm. His limbs feel heavy, weighed down by something. Like they won't obey him anymore. As if they're not his own.

There's a horrible moment of stillness. Sirius stares, willing the door handle to release. For the figure to step away. To leave him.

There's a shift. Slowly, the door creaks open half a foot. From his place on the sofa, he can't see who's outside, only the shadow of the hinges moving, the light of the full moon outside flexing across the floor, reflected from the wood.

Sirius can't breathe. He tries once and then again. Nothing gets in. It feels like something is stepping on his chest.

And his eyes adjust and he sees it. Something is leering around the side of the door, a half inch and then another, and then another, and then another. It's too dark to make out what it is. Sirius squints at it. Perhaps it's a joke. Perhaps it's an omen. Perhaps it's a ghost.

Very gradually, it turns to look at Sirius.

Riddle's eyes are wide and mad, their whites so huge that they seem to sink across the pupils, making his gaze obscenely wide and owlish. His skin is grey in the dull light, head completely hairless, nose distended against his cheeks with its tip flattened into the flesh. He stares at Sirius. Sirius stares right back, utterly paralysed, unable to move a single inch.

And this is where he dies.

"I knew I'd find you eventually, Sirius," Riddle says. A grin spreads over his inhuman face. His voice is as Sirius remembers it was before he made the horcruxes. Young and low. Human, almost, not the croaking rasp it was when he saw him last, at the Rosier Wedding as the world collapsed around them. He pushes the door the rest of the way open and advances a step towards him.

"Don't kill them," Sirius pleads, when he can force himself to make sound. "Let them go. Please. I'll come back. I'll do anything."

Riddle doesn't blink. His mad stare does not flinch. "Anything?"

"Anything," Sirius promises. He can feel a cry rising in his throat. He doesn't want to die, he realises. For the first time in a long time, he doesn't want to die. "Anything."

Riddle advances until he's standing right over Sirius. He raises his wand, the tip stabbing into Sirius' cheek. Sirius is sobbing now, cheeks wet, face crumpled and chest heaving with it, and he can't breathe, he can't breathe, all he can feel is the burn of a future dying in front of him.

"I don't believe you," Riddle murmurs, voice dangerously quiet. "I don't believe a word you say anymore. Whose fault is that?"

"I'm sorry," Sirius cries. He uses his hand to wipe at his face furiously, burning with embarrassment and rage and perhaps cowardice, and perhaps fury. "I'm so sorry."

"You think I care to listen to a word you say?"

"I'm sorry," Sirius says again. He's shaking all over, shaking like this is the fucking Milgram Shock Experiment. "I'm sorry."

Riddle lashes back his left hand and strikes him across the face. Sirius goes tumbling off the sofa onto the floor, bleeding from the mouth. He can taste rust.

"You're going to die here," Riddle tells him. "You're going to die. And I'm going to watch."

Sirius tries to rouse his hand to life. It stays dead and dark. He stares up at Riddle, into the tip of his wand, and attempts to make peace with it. Tries to make it into something he can accept. Tries to write a letter in his head and can't manage it. *Jamie. Jamie. Jamie.*

Outside, the full moon glares through the window into his eyes. Tom shouts the first half of the killing curse. It occurs to Sirius that it's not the full moon again for another two weeks.

"Sirius!" somebody shouts, and he is struck across the face again, and Sirius blinks and shouts and sits up.

He's sprawled on the floor of the living room. The light is turned on overhead, glowing familiar yellow. Galina kneeling is in front of him, her hand raised from when she slapped him, and Yí'ān is crouched on his other side, hands hovering, face very grim.

Sirius stares around wildly, trying to stand, failing, arms shaking. He scrambles back and back and hits the wall. He can't get enough air into his lungs.

"Hey," Yí'ān says, very gently. "Hey. Hey, it wasn't real. You're okay."

Sirius stares. None of it makes sense. "He's going to kill you."

"No he isn't. You're okay. I promise. He's not here."

"No. No." Sirius tries to push himself up the wall, peering over their heads at the door to catch a glimpse of Riddle there, ready to send them all crashing into the walls, ready to rain hell upon each of them. "No. No. No. No. No."

"Can I come closer?" Yí'ān asks. Galina has already sat back, watching Sirius like he's a bomb about to go off.

Sirius stares from Yí'ān to the window, and then at his hands, and then at Galina, and then back at Yí'ān. "I don't know what's going on."

Yí'ān shuffles forwards, putting a hand on one of Sirius' drawn-up knees. "You're in Iceland. Reykjavik. With us. He's not here. It's just us in the apartment. He didn't find us."

"You were shouting," Galina supplies. "He hasn't attacked."

Sirius stares at the hand on his knee, and then back up into Yí'ān's face. "He's not here."

Yí'ān nods. "He's not here." Then, after a pause, "You're crying. You never cry."

Sirius feels his face. "Oh," he says, and then dissolves.

The hour following is a blur. Sirius cries until his head hurts. Yí'ān sits patiently beside him with an arm around him, holding him gently against the side of his chest and talking in a low voice with Galina. Sirius tries to pay attention to what they're saying and, around his throbbing headache, can't manage it, so their conversation fades into a buzzing. He feels like whatever's holding him together, if it goes away, he's going to fucking shatter.

Every shadow looks like Tom's face. Every small sound makes him jump. Every movement feels like it'll be the last thing Sirius sees. He's had nightmares before (he's been having them for years, since Hogwarts), but never have they hurt like this, like he'll never be safe again, like the world will never be liveable again.

It's better that he's not alone, Sirius supposes. And worse, too, in a way. At least if he was on his own, they wouldn't be in danger. Not because of him.

The night fades and wanes into a flat grey dawn. By the time he manages to calm down, his face is puffy and his back is hurting from leaning against the wall. Yí'ān deposits him on the sofa again and sits near until he falls asleep, and long after that, too, until Sirius wakes again a few hours later in a cold sweat, gasping, sitting bolt upright.

"Hey," Yí'ān says. "Hey. You're good."

Sirius thumps at his aching chest with his left fist. "Fuck."

"You with us?"

A nod. "Yeah. I'm okay." Sirius pulls himself together, blinking furiously. He looks up at Yí'ān. "Sorry. About... sorry."

"No worries," Yí'ān says gently. "You're here?"

"I'm here."

"Good. Galina wants to talk to you."

"Fuck," Sirius lets out.

"She's not going to kick you out. She's not angry."

"Did I burn anything?"

Yí'ān shakes his head, looking mystified. "Not a scrap of damage. Not even a scorch mark. Maybe those hunts with Claude have been helping after all."

Sirius doesn't think that's what it is. "Okay," he says, instead of voicing that. His voice comes out very tenuous. "Give me a minute. I'll come out and talk to her."

"Take your time." Yí'ān pats the top of his head. The dog shudders and whines. "You're safe."

"I'm safe," Sirius confirms, and doesn't believe it, not for a moment.

Yí'ān gets up and pads out of the room, still in socks and sweatpants. Sirius sits staring at the wall for probably ten

minutes, maybe fifteen, and doesn't think of anything. He feels his eyes go unfocused and wills away the lingering panic. Tom's not here. He's not here. He's not here, and he never will be. Daylight streams against the door. Fuck.

By the time he manages to drag himself to the kitchen, Galina has made tea. She pushes it across the table at him silently, nodding.

Sirius nods back. "Morning," he says.

By the sink, doing the dishes, Yí'ān smiles gingerly at him. "Morning."

"Are you alright?" Galina asks, less concerned with small talk.

Sirius considers lying and knows he can't. "Sort of," he settles on. "I'm sorry about last night."

She holds a hand up. "You remember what I told you, when you first moved in here?"

Sirius strains his mind. "Uh. You told me I was as much a warrior as any of you, and that, uh, nightmares didn't... didn't change that." He coughs.

Galina nods. "And I meant it. We're not apologising today."

"Okay," Sirius says. "Got it."

"Yí'ān and I," she starts, sort of heavily, "have been arguing."

Sirius stares. He's never heard them argue before. "Oh."

Over the dishes in the sink, Yí'ān shrugs his assent, looking abruptly quite moody.

"We have... different opinions, on how to help," Galina continues. "So we thought we would offer you that choice."

Cold dread fills Sirius. "Nothing has to change," he says quickly. "Nothing."

"We know," Yí'ān puts in. "That's what I've been saying."

Galina puts up a hand. She watches Sirius for a moment, as if trying to interrogate him with her stare. Sirius watches the table, staring into the glassy top of his tea, rippling a little from the jiggling of his leg against the floor.

"I know what he did," Galina says, eventually.

Sirius startles hard enough that he almost falls out of his chair. "What?!" he demands. "What—"

She holds up the same hand again, palm out like she's pushing at a wall he can't see. "Not all of it. But I know about them. The horcruxes."

Sirius stares. She said it like she didn't know it was going to send his whole world crashing down. "Oh."

"Nobody outside of this room knows," she continues. "Yí'ān has been made aware."

"How..." Sirius starts. "How?"

"You're English."

"Yes. Mostly."

"And grew up with money."

"Yes. Mostly."

"Well," Galina sighs. "Sometimes... sometimes, when a community suffers very deeply, a sort of cultural obsession can flourish. When you grow up grieving, you start trying to look for a way to bring back loved ones who haven't died yet. Families and people and countries build it and it grows unchecked. Among wizards, particularly. We are obsessive by nature, I think."

Sirius doesn't have a clue where this is going. "What?"

"My home has seen loss. Loss like you wouldn't believe." Galina runs a hand through her short, greying hair, and pins him with that interrogating, Dumbledoreish look again.

"Yes," Sirius says. "And...?"

She hesitates. "If you'd grown up watching something kill your country, but it was something invisible. Famine. Poverty. Foreign war. You would try to kill the medium, wouldn't you?"

"Oh," Sirius murmurs, understanding, then.

Galina nods. "The magical among us been trying to find a way to defeat death since before the war. Since before I was born, in fact. It's common among magical communities who can't prosper like Western Europe can. Colonised nations, commonwealth states. Conflict-torn wrecks. Countries ruined by the wars."

Something about that makes Sirius feel a little sick. "But they're secret," he says, around a heavy tongue. "They're secret. Nobody knows."

"There's nothing in the world nobody knows." Galina smiles grimly. "I grew up wanting to hunt death and kill him

myself. I've watched brothers and sisters die fighting him. And when you told us your story, I knew."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"You needed time."

"I needed a roof," Sirius chokes. "I needed food. And sleep."

"And time," Galina finishes. She glances away from him, then, freeing Sirius from her stare. "I'm sorry to have kept it from you. This is me telling you, now."

"Then what does this mean?" Sirius demands.

"It means," Galina says, "that if you want to kill him, you need to destroy them, and I can help you."

Sirius stares. He stares at her and then he stares at the tea again. "I can't have help."

"You can't do it alone," Galina contends. "Not in this state."

"I'm not a child!"

"You don't have to be a child to have been hurt by war. To have been touched by loss."

Sirius shakes his head furiously. "When I hunt them, I'm going to hunt them alone."

"What I've been saying," Yí'ān puts in, sighing and letting a plate clatter into the sink. "Is that you should keep up your work with us, Sirius, until you're ready, and then go hunt them alone. But for now, you should stay."

"I like that," Sirius says, nodding furiously.

"I have countered," Galina sighs, "that if you stay here, you're going to go insane."

"I can't go back to England," Sirius blurts out, feverish. "I can't. No. No. No."

Galina watches him. "I'm not saying you have to. Not yet."

Sirius slams his left hand on the table. "You are! You are saying that!"

"I'm saying that if we begin to prepare," she starts.

"You're upsetting him, Galina," Yí'ān interrupts.

She shoots him a very hard look, then directs her attention back at Sirius. "Don't get angry, Sirius."

Sirius realises he's making the tea bubble and spit in front of him. "Sorry," he mumbles, clasping a hand around his hot wrist and forcing it to calm down. "I'm calm. I promise. I just... I just have to stay here. I can't go."

"You don't have to move out," Galina says. "If you'd like, you can tell me where they are and I'll hunt them myself."

"No!" Sirius shouts, and all the windows and doors rattle with it. "Fuck. Sorry."

"I just wish, with all my heart, that this place could shelter you from the war for the rest of your life," Galina starts.

"Why can't it?!"

"Because last night showed me that you're not safe, either."

"Of course I'm safe!" Sirius exclaims. "I'm safer than anywhere else!"

"I've seen grief and fury kill enough soldiers. I refuse to watch it kill you, too."

"I'm not like every other person you've lost—"

Galina shakes her head. "You will be," she says. When she speaks again, her voice is immensely soft. "Sirius, when this is over, you can sleep. You can rest."

"And if I'm scared?!" Sirius demands. He hears his own voice tremble under the weight of the words. "If I'm scared?"

"We're all scared," Galina tells him, gently. "Everyone's scared out here. But it doesn't have to last forever."

Sirius stares desperately from her to Yí'ān, who doesn't meet his eyes. "I can't do this," he says, voice cracking. "I just can't do this."

"But you can try."

"You're going to make me?"

"No," Galina says firmly. "But I'm going to tell you that if you don't, one of these days, a nightmare is going to kill you. Even if it's not in sleep. This is going to kill you."

"I still think, for the record," Yí'ān mutters, from his place leant against the counter. "That we could solve that problem with a therapist."

"Therapists don't win wars," Galina scoffs, quite sadly. "And he wouldn't go to one if paid."

Heartbeat thrumming in his ears, Sirius doesn't know what to say. "Let me think on it," he begs. "Please."

"I don't know how much time you have for that—"

"Galina," Yí'ān says sharply. "Look at him."

Galina hesitates. She puts a heavy hand on Sirius' shoulder. "You don't have to make the decision today," she says. "Just think on it. Okay?"

Sirius takes a deep breath and then, in a rush, stands. "I'm going for a walk," he says stiffly.

"Sirius, kid," Yí'ān starts, looking mildly devastated.

Sirius stalks out of the room and to the front door, fumbling the key in the lock and storming out into the hallway. He runs up the stairs two at a time and out onto the strip of grass outside, and the city leers over him, and he thinks, kill, kill, kill, let this dog taste death, and he disappears.

Sirius comes back to his body in an alleyway somewhere, a few feet down from a nightclub back door which is open a crack, slicing blue-purple light across the floor. He runs out into the street and reads the nearest signpost: Deauville.

"Fuck," Sirius says. He lunges backwards and kicks the nearest wall, hard, and then forces the anger high into his throat until it very near chokes him and sinks into a tiny void again, so tight and close it strangles him.

He lands again, staggers with the impact. All of him is still there, Sirius thinks vaguely, and he's in the middle of a patch of trees in the centre of a huge roundabout. The ocean stretches beyond the fields in the distance. Cars spin around him in a tight circle, and Sirius spies a sign across the road, lit by headlights: Boulogne-sur-Mer, Pas-de-Calais.

Sirius hurtles his foot against the ground hard enough that it jars his knee. He swears and swears and swears again, and throws his fist into the barky middle of a nearby tree, and feels something in his knuckle jerk a bit out of place. He forces himself deeper still into the void, hurtling through space, feeling bits of him come loose like Tom's scalp when all his hair fell out.

When Sirius lands a third time, he's on a crowded street; he staggers blind into the mess, through dozens of strangers whose faces all blur, and finds a map of Roscoff on the ground; he disappears again, nauseous with it, so sick he thinks he's going to fall apart, and he's in Honfleur; and Sirius hurtles once more into the dark, spinning madness of apparition, and lands in Le Havre, before a bay of trembling boats, whose bows all rise high against the pale sky, groaning with the wind and the ferocity of an oncoming storm.

Sirius hits the pier on both knees and retches, fingernails scrabbling across the decking. Somebody shouts and he hurls his fist into the wood, twice, like the fire of it will translate into rage in his tired mind, and again, arm aflame, he disappears, and lands in a back alley somewhere, collapsed in a patch of shadows with his legs strewn in long, dark lines in front of him. His head spins and he leans over and throws up.

Then, a bit like a miracle, heavy brown hands find his shoulders. "Sirius?"

Sirius rolls his chin back over his chest, squinting up. "I was trying to find you."

Claude stares. "Well, you did," they say, and then kneel down. "What happened? Galina?"

"They're okay," Sirius says quickly. "We had... we had an argument."

"Oh," Claude says, and sags a little. "You look terrible."

Sirius rubs at his scuffed knuckles. "Yeah. I've been apparating around. Where are we?"

"Dunkirk," Claude tells him. Their hands stay heavy on his shoulders. "Why did you come to me?"

"I needed... I don't know," Sirius says honestly. "Advice or something."

"It was stupid. It's dangerous here."

"I know. I just..." Sirius trails off. "Sorry. I can go back."

"No," Claude says immediately. When Sirius looks up at them, they crack one of their familiar, cheekbone smiles. "Come on. We can talk. I'm staying not far from here."

They take him to the roof of the apartment they're sharing with a handful of French potioners. Sirius nods to half of them as he crosses through the flat and none of them acknowledge him. Claude sits him down on the concrete rooftop and then plops down beside him. Dunkirk Bay stretches out in front of them, the waters very dark, already bustling with activity.

"So," they say. "Tell me."

Sirius launches into the story without much preamble. He tells Claude about the bad night (without detail) and about the argument. About Galina having known something this

whole time, about how she didn't tell him. About how she wants him to do something he can't do, and give something he can't give. Claude listens in silence, not commenting once. The quiet of it is nice. Sirius feels like he can breathe.

"And so I left," Sirius finishes. "I just couldn't keep... sitting there. So I left."

"Mmm," Claude says. They fish into their pocket and toss Sirius a strip of gum, wrapped in silver foil.

"Thanks," Sirius murmurs, unwrapping it and chewing perhaps a bit aggressively.

"No worries." Claude is quiet for a bit.

"What are you thinking about?" Sirius asks, when the anxiety of it starts to get on top of him.

"I'm thinking," Claude says, "of what Yí'ān would say."

"And what would he say?"

"That you can hide out for the rest of your life if you want to."

"That's about it," Sirius mutters. Personally, it sounds like a great idea.

"He's not wrong about it, you know," Claude concedes. "You could run for the rest of your life and probably make it, if you were smart about it."

"You think so?"

Claude nods thoughtfully. "The longer you stay away, the more likely this guy is to think you're dead. The longer you spend running, the less likely he'll be to stumble on you by

accident. You could live the rest of your life like this, if you wanted."

"I could," Sirius agrees, swept up in it for a second.

"Until Galina and Yí'ān die, that is."

Oh. He flinches involuntarily.

"Then you'd have to find somebody else," Claude continues, as if oblivious to his discomfort. "And hide with them 'til they die fighting in their own war."

Sirius squirms uncomfortably but says nothing. The gum starts to taste too sweet.

"And from there," Claude continues, "find another. And another. You couldn't stay in Europe, because if you're the only one who can kill him, his influence will only grow. He'll take over other wizarding states. You'll have to flee to some island in the antarctic."

"Claude—"

"And from there," they carry on, right over him. "Maybe you could fly to the moon! Muggles can do that now. Reckon he wouldn't find you there for quite some time. I wonder if the Trace works on the moon? We could get you a wand again."

"Stop," Sirius says. "I get it."

"Do you?" Claude asks airily. "You wouldn't see your friends again, either, your loved ones. They'll die under his thumb in England, wondering where you were."

"Claude!" Sirius shouts. "I get it! I get it. I get it. I'm sorry."

Claude sighs. "No apologies," they say. "You know, they coddle you too much. I don't agree with Galina. I think she's not quite been hard enough."

This isn't what Sirius came here for. "Oh."

"You're plenty traumatised. Quite a mess. We all know that; you don't hide it."

"Thanks," Sirius says, flushing.

Claude waves a hand. "You can be as traumatised as you like," they say. "Once the war is done."

Sirius chews on that. "It feels like it'll never be done," he says truthfully.

"It won't, if you stay in Iceland for the rest of your life."

"I don't think I can go back. I don't think I'm strong enough."

"Maybe you're not," Claude says.

"Thanks," Sirius mutters.

They nudge him with their broad shoulder. "You won't know until you try."

Sirius hesitates. "I don't think I can."

Claude regards him. "What was the nightmare about?" they ask.

"Him. Obviously."

"No," they say. "What happened in it?"

Sirius stares. "I don't want to—"

"Tell me."

He blinks. "He was in Iceland," he says, before he can stop himself. "Uh, in the apartment. He came to get me. Told me he would kill Galina and Yí'ān. And I couldn't—" He's already breaking out in a cold sweat. "I couldn't—"

Claude stops him there. "Then for as long as you stay there — or anywhere — he'll be staying there with you. You won't ever get peace."

"That's what Galina said."

"She got one thing right. And quite frankly, it's not all about that. It's not all about you. It's about the other dozens and hundreds of kids who are having nightmares back home who can't run off to Europe," Claude reprimands.

Hot shame floods Sirius' gut. "Then you think I should go back to Britain."

"I think," Claude says, turning to look out over Dunkirk. "That you should make use of the allies you have here. There's rather a lot of us freedom fighters out here." He nudges Sirius again. "We can help you."

Sirius stares down at his wrapped arm, at the pen knife tattoo. "I have to do it alone. Most of it."

"Who says?"

"If people know, they'll do it too."

"And we'll fight them, too."

"And if you can't?"

Claude's faint smile goes wistful. It's an expression Sirius has never seen on them before. "Then the ones that come after us will."

Sirius thinks about that for a while, turning back to look over the bay again. At his side, Claude doesn't speak again. They seem to know that they've made their point.

They stay there for some time. Sirius would like to stay there forever, and maybe Claude knows that, because after a bit, they reach out and take Sirius' arm, twisting where they sit to disappear. The two of them churn through space and time and land on the grassy stretch in Reykjavik, Sirius barely catching his feet under him.

"Go talk to them," Claude says.

"You want me to go back tomorrow?" Sirius demands. When they try to let go of his arm, he keeps their hand there.

Claude snorts out a laugh. "I want you to be brave," they say. "See you soon. Don't come find me again, alright?"

"Not unless I'm dying," Sirius confirms.

"You won't be," Claude promises. They step away, and then they're gone, leaving Sirius alone under the grey sky.

Jamie,

Finding my way back to you. Talked to Claude. I'm fixing this.

Love you,

- S.O.B

Late that night, he finds Galina sitting on comms. It's the first time he's spoken to her since the argument that morning, and Sirius is convinced she'll be angry at him, but she just sighs and puts down her pen. It's dark outside. A candle burns on the windowsill like a vigil.

"Sirius," she says.

"I want to do it," Sirius tells her. It takes every ounce of bravery and will he has left, which isn't much. It feels like the world has sapped almost all of that out of him. "I want to stop him."

Galina stares. "You're sure?" she asks.

Sirius nods. "I can't mourn anybody else."

She nods, a faintly victorious look on her tired face. Sirius steps back as she stands up, and watches her grab her coat.

"Where—" he starts.

"Come," Galina tells him, striding out into the hallway. She shoots him a hard look over her shoulder. "We're going to my home."

Chapter End Notes

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AMELIE

Chapter Notes

phew! phew phew phew! time for some big boy action! ive been listening to kettering by the antlers all day and thinking of this wip and im not abt to stop now. go listen if you want! love u all so much.

tw: some spooey horror stuff, injury, violence.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Like a plague, they descend along the mountainside, dressed in dark clothes, as many of them will fit (two) shoved tight under the cloak. James presses close to Remus' side, baseball bat strapped tight to his back. His leather jacket creaks between them. Remus does his best not to shudder with the cold, watching the top of Lily's head up in front as she leads the way, Mary between them all. He has to stoop down to make sure the cloak covers both him and James, too tall for this to be very practical now. It reminds him of the Hogwarts days.

And the castle is right ahead; perhaps that's it. Her dark spires pierce the grey sky, spots of golden light dotted sparsely and in pairs along the towers. From this far away, the forbidden forest stretching broad and black like a bastion between them, it almost looks like nothing has changed about it. It could nearly be the same place.

Down the sloping path, Lily pulls to a halt to stare at it. James stops, too, and Remus beside him, and the four of them stand there for a few stolen moments, watching their

old home, imagining it hasn't become something new. Imagining it's still safe.

"Missed Scotland," James sighs. "Got a crick in my neck, though. The train ride was murder."

Lily looks over her shoulder at them. "You're not too far behind us?"

Remus pulls James the rest of the way down the slope to her to touch Lily's arm through the cloak. It makes her jump. "Hi."

Lily whacks him, or tries to. It misses and she hits James. "Prick."

"Oi!" James protests. "Hit him, not me!"

She whacks him again. "Are you okay, Mary? We can take a break."

Mary shuffles down towards them, almost tripping over Remus. "I'm okay," she confirms, with a shaking breath. "I'm... I'm alright, yeah. Just want to get down there."

"I don't," mutters James.

"Well, there's no turning back now," Remus tells him. "Unless you want to get back on the train."

"You couldn't pay me."

"Good. We've no money, after the last rent payment."

"Come on," Lily says. "Let's keep going."

They trek the rest of the way to the foot of the mountains in silence. Remus has a blister in his shoe, right against the

flesh of the side of his small toe, and it hurts with vengeance. He doesn't complain. James' shoulders hike up higher and higher the lower ground they all reach. He's nervous. Remus squeezes his hand and he doesn't squeeze it back.

They reach the slip of stone where the mountain trail tails into thick greenery, a tangle of ferns leading to the mouth of the Forbidden Forest. Under the harsh moonlight, Lily leads them into the belly of the beast. It's three days off the next moon (the last day of February, Snape had insisted, thank god it's the shortest month, Remus supposes). Remus is trying to pretend he can't feel it, which is pretty difficult, it turns out.

"It should be empty," Lily tells them, as the trees sweep overhead to block out the sky. There's a very narrow, single-file footpath into the silver-foiled darkness ahead.

"Very reassuring," James mutters, fumbling his way in front of Remus.

Surprisingly enough, the Forbidden Forest is as empty as Remus has ever seen it. Birds and unseen creatures chirp in the trees, watching. Some smell like predators but most smell like prey. Nothing approaches them. If the centaurs were here, they've long-since disappeared. Remus can't even smell the rotten-guts stench of huge spiders.

Nobody dares to speak as they cut through the quiet, through the dark stillness which does not blink. Lily stays in front, one hand clutched around her pocket knife, which is flipped open and glinting at her side. Mary hovers right behind her, almost tripping over her, head whipping back and forth as she stares around. James stumbles through the overgrowth in front of Remus, the cloak shrouding his

shoulders. Remus presses tight against his back behind him.

"Suppose it makes sense why students have been trying to make a run for it through here," he tells James, mostly to fill the silence, as they pick their way over a frozen stream.

"Yeah?" James asks distractedly.

"Empty. Completely."

"You can't smell anything?"

"Nothing more than animals and a handful of magical birds. They've harvested most of the magical plants."

"Beery's going to be heartbroken."

Remus huffs a laugh. "I think you and Sirius broke his heart years ago, with all the ruckus you made in his lessons."

James doesn't laugh back, just sighs. "Suppose you're right."

Up ahead, Lily pulls to a stop. "We're near the other side," she calls back to them quietly. "We should stick close together."

Remus and James speed up to reach her and Mary's side. Through the foliage, in the far distance, the glow of the castle's windows spikes through gaps in the trees. As they walk, the leaves overhead become thin enough to see the dark sky through. Remus has a headache.

When a dark shape swells into view ahead, squatting beside the forest, Remus squints at it, trying to make out what it is.

"Oh," James murmurs. "We're here."

"Come on," Lily whispers. She picks up her pace to a jog and breaks out of the treeline, glancing both ways. Then, she skids across Hagrid's pumpkin patch to crouch against the wall of his hut. Remus, James and Mary follow.

It's completely deserted. Hagrid's pumpkins have gone rotten, unharvested, and the windows of his house are dark. The air is very still. Remus and James shuffle together to sit against the stone wall, and Mary sits between James and Lily, hands fiddling incessantly in her lap. She's biting her lip so hard it's bleeding in spots.

James squeezes her arm and she jumps. "You're okay," he murmurs, sounding sort of helpless.

"Yeah," Lily confirms, glancing from Mary to the path along the edge of the forest, its hard-packed earth almost black in the dim light. "You're okay."

"Not too late to go back," James jokes.

Remus elbows him, without much force. "Much too late, now. Unless you want to wait it out in the forest 'til the portkey goes off."

Lily shakes her head. She keeps staring at the path. There's something almost hungry in her face.

"No," she says, after a moment. Such force in her voice is unusual for her. "No, we've... we've got to do this."

"Right," James mutters. "Okay, then."

They slip back into silence. Remus fiddles with the sleeve of James' jacket, dragging the zip up and down. James doesn't

complain. The hard, icy earth under them is enough to render them all shuddering with cold, and in a sort of chain, Remus can feel each of them shiver. Every few seconds, Mary swears under her breath, looking very ill.

It feels like they've been waiting for hours when there is movement nearby. All four of them freeze. Remus peers around Lily to watch the path, and makes out a figure in the distance, walking down from the quidditch pitch towards the forest, dark robes whipping out behind them.

Lily lunges to her feet. Remus, James and Mary all try to grab her, but she shakes them off and takes off running down the path towards Snape. Remus watches him see her, startle, and then start running, too. They meet each other in the middle and slam together like magnetised things, hugging very tightly, their shadowy figures almost one with the trees.

"Oh, bloody hell," James mutters. He tugs Remus to his feet, both of them still under the cloak. "Come on."

Remus staggers to his feet. Mary rises with them, her hands shaking so hard they don't look completely attached to her. The three of them slip through the darkness to the path, Lily and Snape's joint shadow streaming towards them.

"And I'm sorry," Snape is saying when they get within earshot. "I'm so sorry, Lily, for the things I said and for not writing enough, and... I'm sorry. I've been a bad friend. But you're here now. Right? You're staying."

"Of course I am," Lily promises. "There are just some things I need to do first."

"Anything. I'll help you with anything," Snape promises.

Remus and James reach Lily's side, and Mary along with them, all five of them clustered together. Remus touches Lily's arm under the cloak.

"Why is she here?" Snape asks, then, staring at Mary.

Mary bristles, or maybe that's just the trembling working its way up to her shoulders. "I'm with her," she says.

"Mary's been hiding out with me," Lily explains. She bites her lip, peering over her shoulder in Remus and James' general direction. "You two should take that off."

"What?" Snape asks, staring.

James yanks the cloak off himself and Remus, and makes a show of brushing himself off, the picture of nonchalance. *Here we go*, Remus thinks.

"Alright?" James says, nodding to Snape. No insults yet. Better than expected, honestly.

Snape stares between James and Remus. Then, his face twists as if he's bitten into something sour. He turns back to Lily. "Why are they here?" he asks, as if James and Remus can't hear him.

"They've been..." Lily winces, and Remus can relate.

"They've been hiding out with me too, Sev. Both of them."

"Why?!"

"Because we've all been on the run," she sighs. "James' parents are dead, the death eaters killed them. Remus is a... blood traitor."

"I know he's a werewolf," Snape snaps, and it's Remus' turn to flinch.

"Then you know he's in danger."

Snape glares at Remus imperiously. "Maybe he should be. Honestly, you probably haven't even been safe this whole time, staying with him—"

James goes very stiff. Remus grabs his arm and squeezes very hard. Snape is the only one among them who can use magic. They can't win this fight, not like they used to win them. They aren't children anymore.

"Shut up," James settles on saying, looking rather like he wants to say more than that. "Seriously. We don't have time for this."

Lily exchanges a glance with Remus, and they both seem to decide simultaneously to do damage control. "They're my friends, Severus," she tells Snape. "They've taken care of me."

"You could have come back."

"They kidnapped muggleborns off the train! They've been throwing them in Azkaban!"

"Only the ones who have broken the law," Severus says, like that makes any fucking sense. "They all get trials. They've radicalised you out there."

"Being hunted and watching my friends get hurt has radicalised me," Lily snaps. "Sev, I had to leave my family behind."

Snape's face softens. "You've been so brave," he says.

"Only because I've had to be."

"But you're staying now?"

"If our, uh, plan goes okay," Lily replies, and she's not quite as good at bullshitting as Remus, but Snape seems too enamoured by her to notice. "There's some stuff we have to do first, and then we're going to meet with the headmaster and, uh. Get back into school. We've been, erm, studying alone, so we can rejoin classes."

"Potions has been awful without you," Snape says, with fierce sincerity. Remus feels sort of sick. He doesn't know. He doesn't know a bloody thing.

"We need to move," James cuts in impatiently. "Night won't last forever."

Snape acts as if James hasn't spoken at all. "Where have you been staying?" he asks Lily.

"Kent," Lily says quickly. "In a small town. It's secluded. We've been lying low, mostly. Uh. Studying."

Remus almost laughs. That sounds like heaven compared to what the past year has really been.

"And you've been safe?" Snape asks, pressing, a sort of edge to his voice. "With... this?" He points to Remus.

"We need to move," James says again, more forcefully, and pushes right up into Snape's space.

Snape turns to look at him, pinning James with a look like James is something disgusting he's found on the floor of the owlery. "I don't recall asking you."

"He's right—" Lily starts.

"If you don't want to help us," James says, "why are you here? Fuck off back to the dungeons and spend the night wanking over a photo of you-know-who, see if we care."

Snape scowls. "You need me," he spits. "I don't need you."

"You need Lily."

"She doesn't need you, either."

"Funny, that," James snaps. "She's been staying with us for months, sleeping in the bunk bed over us, eating dinner with us, listening to our radio. It's been me that's patched up her wounds, not you. Funny that she needs you more."

Lily shoves between them. "Stop," she commands.

But Snape has already whipped his wand out, and he points it around Lily at James, edging her out of the way with the side of his arm. "One word," he threatens. "One more word, Potter."

James bares his teeth at him. "*Snivellus*."

"James," Remus barks, loudly enough that he feels all of them jump. "*Stop*. We've got a job to do."

Still scowling, James steps away, pulling Lily with him a bit like a human shield. "Let's go," he says dourly.

Snape doesn't look ready to drop the argument. He has a long, silent exchange with Lily. Her face is very harsh. After a few seconds, he sighs and steps away, seeming to concede.

"Where first?" he asks.

"Slytherin common room," James says.

Snape raises an artful eyebrow. "Excuse me?"

"Slytherin common room," James repeats irritably. "There's someone we need to talk to. And no, we're not telling you who."

"Wait," Remus cuts, and grabs James' arm. "Wait, look—"

He reaches into his jacket and yanks out the Map. With fumbling hands, he unfolds it and shoves it at Snape, pointing to the centre.

"Tap your wand there," Remus instructs. "And say, 'I solemnly swear that I am up to no good'. Please?"

Snape looks at Remus like he's being accosted by a mad person. "What?" he asks.

"Just do it, Sev," Lily sighs.

Staring between James and Remus, Snape curls his lip. He lowers his wand to the parchment and says, with perhaps too much enunciation, "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good."

Ink blossoms across the parchment. Remus wrenches it back from Snape and holds it up in front of himself and James. They crowd around it, shoulders pressed together.

"There," James says, locating the Slytherin common room in the dungeons, from which the girls' and boys' dorms blossom like ferns. "Let's find her..."

He trails off. Remus stares, too; there are four names in the Slytherin fourth year girls' dorm. None of them are Amelie

Bullstrode.

"She's not there," James mutters.

Remus frowns. "It's one, one-thirty, isn't it? She shouldn't be out of bed..."

James is already scouring the other dorms. She's not in any of them, nor the common room. Remus peers through the rest of the Map, distracted by how much he'd missed the sight of it. Sirius' handwriting is almost unfamiliar.

"Not in the library," James mutters, running a finger down a corridor on the fourth floor. "Not in the owlery... check the astronomy tower?"

"Nothing," Remus murmurs.

"Try the other common rooms?" Lily offers, closing in around the other side of the Map and trying to read it upside down.

"Good idea," James praises. "Come on, where's the Hufflepuffs..."

Snape is staring at them; Remus can feel his hard gaze digging into the top of his head. He says nothing. That's sort of worse. It means he's probably scheming.

"Not with the Ravenclaws," Remus says, to prove to Snape he isn't paying him any attention. "What about Gryffindor tower?"

"Nothing," James confirms. Then, he laughs. "Look, Pete's in the dorm!"

Sure enough, Peter's name is hovering alone in the Gryffindor sixth year boys' dorm, unmoving. Probably asleep, or catching up on some essay he hasn't finished, Remus thinks, with a rush of fondness.

"Okay," Lily cuts in. "Okay, so here's the plan. I say we go to Gryffindor tower first."

"What?" James and Snape ask at the same time, and then turn to glare daggers at one another.

Lily clicks her fingers between their faces to snap their attention back to her. "No fighting," she says. "We'll go to Gryffindor tower first, okay? And that'll give us a chance to see the rest of Padfoot's Army—"

"And Dorcas!" Mary puts in, face lighting up, almost manic.

"Yeah. Dorcas, too," Lily agrees. "And we can stay there and search the whole Map, and wait 'til we see her. That way, if she shows up, we can go find her from there, and we've got a safe place to stay waiting. And if she doesn't show up, then her parents must have pulled her out, right? So... so we can just portkey out of Gryffindor tower." And then it'll be a bust, she doesn't say.

James and Remus exchange looks. Only a week ago, a letter from Elias the Ravenclaw informed them both that, at that point, Bullstrode was still at Hogwarts. She's certainly still there. The question is where.

"Please?" Mary says, catching their attention. Her lip is shaking just a bit. "I know it puts a wrench in things. I just... I just need to see her."

James nods. "Okay," he agrees. "Gryffindor tower first. And there, we'll keep an eye on the Map and search properly,

and figure out where she is. And we can talk to Peter and all the rest."

"Yeah," Remus echoes, not really thinking about it. Agreeing with James is as easy as breathing.

"Okay," Lily says. She turns to Snape. "You can come up with us, if you'd like."

"Yes," Snape says immediately, surprisingly. "I'm not leaving you alone with these two."

"Possessive," James mutters. "You know most girls don't like that, right?"

Snape's black eyes flick between James and Remus. "I don't think you know much about girls, Potter."

Remus puts an arm out to stop James from advancing. "The night's leaving us behind," he reminds them both, determined not to rise to the bait. "Come on."

The castle is silent, the walls still in a way they weren't when Remus was here last, or perhaps that's just his imagination. Maybe he's idealised this place, he thinks, arm locked through James' as they hold the Map out in front of them under the cloak. Perhaps it was always like this: crawling with silence, shuddering with tension, like at any moment something will lunge from the shadows to eat them alive.

There are professors on patrol through the hallways, two of them, both new, because Remus doesn't recognise their names. James halts the group whenever they get too close, in time for them all to pile into an abandoned classroom or

to hide behind a tapestry. There are no ghosts lingering in the corridors. Remus wonders where they've gone. All the portraits are empty.

By the time they make it up to the portrait of the Fat Lady, it must be close to two in the morning. Lily hesitates in front of her, obviously trying to guess what it's likely to be.

"I know it," Snape offers from her side. "I'm on the patrol squad. We know all the passwords."

"Still couldn't make it into Ravenclaw tower, I'd bet," James mutters.

Snape lashes out a foot to kick James in the shins. It hits Remus instead, who groans faintly.

"Oi!" James starts, too loud.

"Shh," Lily hisses. "All of you, stop it. Sev, go ahead."

Snape clears his throat. "Excuse me?"

The Fat Lady looks away from the mirror she was checking her reflection in. "Yes? Rather late in?"

"We went for a walk," Snape says stiffly. "The password is 'managot'."

The Fat Lady's portrait swings open. Snape steps inside first, and there's a flurry of movement inside and a small shout. Remus and James pile through next, in time to see a figure holding Snape against the wall, their wand pressed to his throat.

"What are you doing in here?" they ask, almost a growl.

"I'm on the patrol squad," Snape snaps. "Let go of me."

There's a small scream. The figure — it's a girl, Remus realises now, though he doesn't know of any girls in Gryffindor with hair shaved like that — looks up, out of the portrait hole, and drops Snape with a yell.

"Mary!" she shouts.

"Dorcas!" Mary cries, throwing herself through the entrance and into Dorcas' arms. Dorcas lets out a delighted laugh and spins Mary around in a circle. They clutch one another so tightly that their fingers must almost draw blood, digging into each other's backs.

"Oh, Merlin," Dorcas says, muffled into Mary's shoulder. "I was so worried. I've been so worried. Fuck."

"I'm okay," Mary says, though she's started shaking again, perhaps for a different reason. She pulls back slightly, arms looped around Dorcas' neck. "Your hair."

"Wanted a change," Dorcas replies. Her face is so weak that it's like Mary has stolen all the air from her. Completely love-drunk.

"I like it," Mary laughs. Then, she sobs. "Oh, Dorcas."

Lily clambers through the portrait hole, closing it behind herself. She fumbles through the air until her hand finds James' arm through the cloak. "You two got in."

"Yeah," James snorts.

"I was worried I'd left you out there," Lily grins, not looking away from Dorcas and Mary. Remus can scarcely think to look away either. It's private and beautiful at the same time.

"I'm okay," Dorcas is saying. "I promise. It's you I'm worried about. Is—" She wheels around, still tangled up with Mary, staring around wildly. "Is Marlene—"

"She's gone overseas," Lily says, leaning against Remus slightly. "She's safe. Hi, Dorcas."

"Lily!" Dorcas cries. "Oh my god. Hi." Gingerly, she disentangles herself from Mary, running to hug her friend.

"It's good to see you alive," Lily says, squeezing her very tightly. Remus watches her white face make a valiant attempt not to crumple with grief. "You shouldn't have come back. You're so stubborn."

"I know." Dorcas pulls away. "I just had to."

Then, she peers around, past Snape and over Dorcas.

"Where are they, then?" she asks. "Lupin and Potter."

James barks out a laugh and throws the cloak off him and Remus. "Alright, Meadowes?"

"There's that stupid face," Dorcas snorts. "Come here, both of you."

Remus and James obey. She squeezes them very tightly, with a hard, feral sort of grip, like she hasn't been hugged in a very long time. When she lets Remus go, he feels a bit shaky, like the scaffolding's been taken off him.

"And yours," James assents. He beams around, taking in the common room. "I missed it here."

"I need to wake the others," Dorcas says, with dawning comprehension. "Stay here."

Before any of them can stop her, she's darted across the room, running up the girls' staircase to the dormitories. Mary straightens up and runs off after her, calling her name, leaving Lily, Remus, James and Snape alone in the common room, dimly lit with the dying embers in the fireplace.

James claps his hands together. "Now that we can see properly, let's take a look at the Map..."

He and Remus spread it out atop a nearby table, peering down at it together, heads knocking against each other. Remus scours the library, the kitchens, the empty great hall, the classrooms. James tears his finger over the grounds, through the empty quidditch pitch. Nothing. Nothing's even moving, besides the names in Gryffindor tower, a handful of names in the Ravenclaw common room, and the teachers on patrol.

"Huh," Remus murmurs, mostly to himself.

"Nothing?" Lily asks, crowding in around James' side. Remus swears he can hear Snape growl.

"Nothing," James confirms. "Nothing we can see, anyway. Maybe her family really did pull her out."

But Remus doubts that immensely. "The Bullstrodes are death eaters," he says. "They're not about to conscientiously object."

"You never know. People can change." James glances at Lily. "We know that."

Lily shoots him a look that clearly says, now is not the time. James sighs and looks back at the Map.

Across the common room, Snape coughs. Remus hadn't known it was possible for a cough to sound derisive, but he supposes there's a first time for everything. "Who are you looking for?"

"None of your business," James snaps. "You couldn't help."

"James," Lily sighs more than scolds. She straightens up, looking over at Severus. "It's... a part of the thing we have to do."

"And you can't tell me what it is?" Snape asks.

"No," Lily says. Then, she amends, "Not yet. It's something to, uh. To help..." She trails off.

"To help the headmaster," Remus fills in, plucking that out of thin air. "He's been in contact. He's trying to bring kids who dropped out back."

Snape stares dubiously, seeming caught between the desire to ignore Remus and to glare at him. "He is?"

"That's part of it," Lily says. She steps on Remus' toe to keep him quiet. "It's complicated. I promise we'll explain it all later. Just trust me, okay?"

Snape's face goes strange. "Of course," he says. "Always."

Gryffindors pile down the stairs from the dorms in sleepy masses, most of them letting out cheers when they see James, Remus and Lily. Remus is hugged and ruffled and elbows by dozens of lions. Sucks that he doesn't remember most of their names now, but he does a good job at pretending, he thinks.

James laps up the attention, beaming. He might as well be glowing. Remus spends half the time watching him fondly, and the other half of the time trying not to prickle under Snape's glare from the corner. It feels like being in fourth year again, a bit, and it's decisively not a good feeling.

Remus doesn't remember much of fifth year, doesn't even remember much of Padfoot's Army. For the most part, the year was James, all of it, every bit of it. Keeping James from spiralling, keeping James on both feet. Keeping the world at the right angle, for the both of them, but mostly for James. Being back feels like resurrection, but the type where the thing comes back different, inches off what it used to be, spun a bit to the left.

When Peter comes down the boys' stairs, James gives a great roar and barrels through the crowd towards him, wrapping Peter in a huge hug. Peter shouts, wordless and sort of confused more than happy, and hugs him back. Remus follows James.

"Alright, Pete?" James greets, grinning too broadly for his face. "God, I've missed seeing you, you're here, this is amazing! How have you been doing?"

"Why— what—" Peter stares between them, halfway grinning, halfway horrified. It muddles his features. "What? Why are you here?"

Remus reaches their sides, slapping Peter hard on the back. "Doing some stuff for the cause," he says lowly. "We can't talk about it. There's something we've got to find."

"Oi!" calls a voice through the crowd, effectively breaking their reunion up. "You lot!"

James and Remus look up. A seventh year is pushing through the crowds, Hestia Jones, Remus thinks her name is, tall and willowy. She's cut off all her dark hair, perhaps in solidarity with Dorcas, who is pushing along behind her, clutching Mary's hand.

Lily appears beside Remus. "Here we go," she mutters in his ear.

"What?" Remus asks.

"What's the plan?" Jones cuts in, reaching them. The chatter in the room falls silent, and suddenly there are dozens of eager eyes staring all of them down.

"What?" James asks.

"Well, what are we doing?" Dorcas asks. She glances from Lily to James to Remus. "How are we fighting? What's our strategy?"

"We're..." James blinks. "We don't have one?"

"Great," Jones says. "Awesome. Best kind."

"No," Remus cuts in. He raises his hands in front of him. "We're not here to fight," he says.

"You're not?"

"That's what I've been trying to tell them," Mary says. "We've got something we need to find. We're not here... this isn't a resistance thing."

"But... so, the Order's not here?" Dorcas asks, seeming to deflate.

"I'm sorry," James says, looking quite devastated. "It's just us. We had to sneak in — that's why Snape's here."

In the corner, Snape frowns his assent.

"We just need to find it," James finishes. "And... and then we'll go."

Remus watches Snape's face break.

"Shit," Lily murmurs.

Displeased murmurs ripple through the crowd. Near Remus, two second-year girls glance at one another, looking crestfallen.

"This is to help with the resistance," Remus says quickly, maybe to rescue the last of the morale before it drains away. "It's to help the war effort. There's someone we need to talk to."

"Who?" Jones asks, perking up a bit.

"We can't... we can't say. A Slytherin." Remus pulls the Map out of his jacket again, spreading it out and showing it to Jones and Dorcas. "Someone who's been in contact with a person of interest. She's got information we need. We're waiting for her name to show up on here. While we look, we just... we just wanted to make sure everyone's okay. That's all."

It feels very stupid now, Remus thinks, their bright-eyed plan to reconvene with the Gryffindors. Everybody in the common room looks tired and drawn, like they've only known stress and fear and nothing else for all the time Lily, James and Remus have been gone. A few of the girls have short hair, he notices, peering through the crowd, and a

handful of students including Dorcas have bruises or cuts on their faces. There's a firstie with an arm that looks broken, hanging in a makeshift sling.

Of course it wasn't going to be a victorious return from war; it's been a war here, too.

"Well," Dorcas says diplomatically. "I mean, whatever we can do to help... are you sure you're not... you can't stay?"

Lily shoots a look at Snape, who is staring at her with a terribly betrayed look on his face. "We... I..."

Remus puts a hand on her arm. "Let's sit down," he murmurs. "And keep watching. Let James handle them."

James is already launching into action. He's a jester when he's like this, capering at the crowd, and he slings an arm around Mary and immediately begins regaling the Gryffindors with the tale of their daring break-in at the Ministry. He shoots Remus a very quick glance, nodding once.

Remus leads Lily to a chair nearby, a low table beside it, and sits adjacent to her. She's very pale and looks extraordinarily uncomfortable.

"Come on," Remus tells her. "Let's keep looking." He spreads the Map out over their legs.

Lily nods, looking faint. Then, she looks up. "Don't let Severus leave the common room."

"You want me to ask someone to stun him?" asks Dorcas, kneeling beside Lily.

Lily startles, then smiles faintly. "Thanks, Dorcas. Just... tell them to be gentle."

"We're Gryffindors," Dorcas snorts; she's got a deep cut through the bottom of her lip, and twists as she speaks. She stands up. "We don't know how to be gentle."

Lily opens her mouth to reply, but Dorcas has already stood up and disappeared into the crowd. She shuts it again.

Remus begins pouring over the Map. Still no Bullstrode; not in her dorm, not in any of the classrooms or common rooms. Lily leans in dutifully beside him, looking too. Her shaking knee trembles the Map up and down.

"It's okay," Remus murmurs. "You're good. We're okay."

Across the room, there's a scuffle; a seventh year boy, something-or-other Johnson, from the Quidditch team, wrestles Snape's wand out of his hand and points it at him. "Stupefy!"

Snape goes down like a lead balloon. A few heads turn, but most people are crowded around James, enamoured with his storytelling.

Lily throws her hands over her mouth and half-stands. "Sev —"

Remus puts a hand on her arm. "He's okay. Just stunned."

She stares over at him, then at Remus, and then at the floor. Her green eyes are very wet. Remus had never paid attention to the colour of them before.

"Yeah," she murmurs, and wipes her face. "I thought... I thought..."

"What?"

"I thought things might be different now," Lily says.
"Different than they were when I last spoke to him."

"What do you mean?" Remus asks, and dreads the answer.

"I don't know." She wipes her face again, harder this time, like she's frustrated by herself. "I guess... the last time we spoke, we argued. Had a big argument, I mean. About you, and James, and Sirius, and... and everything. I've told you about it before."

"Yeah," Remus murmurs.

"And he told me, even then, that it was supposed to be us against the world, and that even if things changed, they didn't have to change between us, and that he'd protect me, even if... even if..." Lily trails off. "And he's acting like that never happened. Like nothing changed."

"Oh," Remus says helplessly.

"He's... and the thing is this, Severus is so stupid sometimes. Far too much like James sometimes." Lily makes a frustrated noise. "He gets tunnel vision and thinks the only things in the world that matter are... are houses and rivalries and what people think of him, and... and me."

Remus thinks of James and Sirius, and the two of them together, and his heart throbs. "I know," he says. "I know."

"And I guess I'd hoped he'd grown up and smelled the roses by now," she finishes. "You know. I hoped he'd realised this is something he can't avoid forever. Something I certainly can't avoid. But he acts like everything can be okay. That

nothing needs to change. But it does. It does need to change."

A realisation seems to hit Lily, then. She tightens her jaw and looks hard at Remus, face very fierce.

"Things do need to change," she says again, and looks around, taking in the common room which is no longer their home. "Things need to change."

"Yeah," Remus replies softly, because he can't think of anything else to say that won't upset him. "Yeah, they do."

They sit in that quiet for a bit, listening to the chatter and laughter, neither of them looking out into the room. Remus wants to take her hand and figures that isn't a good idea, and he should probably not.

When somebody collapses into the chair beside Remus, they both flinch. It's Peter, red-faced and with his mousey hair sticking up all over the place from where James has probably been rubbing his hands through it. He's got that muddled look on his face still, between joy and terror.

"Hi, Wormy," Remus says, not able to think of much else to say in that moment. "Alright?"

"You shouldn't be here," Peter says.

"Oh. Well, thanks."

Peter shakes his head frantically. "I didn't mean— I didn't mean it like that," he blurts. "I'm glad you're here. I am. I missed you both."

"Good," Remus says tiredly. "We missed you too." It almost feels like it isn't a lie.

"They'll kill you if they find you."

"We know. They'll kill us anyway."

"Then why come here?"

"There's things we need to do," Remus says. He can't stop staring at Peter, then, drinking in his face like it'll be the last time he sees it; and perhaps it will be. "Stuff that we need to do if we want to win the war. And... and we're really in the war now."

"Because of Sirius," Peter says, not a question.

"Because of lots of things," Remus replies, not an answer.

"Oh," Peter mutters. He looks very small then, sunken into the folds of the chair as if his skin doesn't quite fit him anymore.

"How have things been for you, Peter?" Lily asks gingerly.

Peter glances at her. It's the first time she's spoken to him using his first name, Remus is pretty sure. "Uh," he says. "Things are alright here. All things considered. Bad, but we're all alive, right? They haven't killed any of us." *Yet*, he doesn't say.

Remus chews his lip. "You're all taking care of each other?"

"For the most part," Peter nods. His face tightens, something in his jaw twitching.

"We've been worried," Remus says lamely.

Peter makes a strange noise in the very back of his throat. Almost a laugh. "I've been worried about you too."

Remus stares at him. He sort of wants to say, *yell, if you're going to yell. Get angry. Throw things. We've all done plenty of that.* Though he supposes that isn't true. If there's one among them who can't say much about yelling and throwing things, it's him, and perhaps Peter knows how that feels, Remus contemplates, as he watches his friend chew on his thumbnail.

"I don't," Peter starts. He stops himself. "I..."

"What's wrong?" Remus asks, though it's not the right thing to say in any world.

Peter shakes his head, and then shakes it again. In a rush, almost a tumbling motion, he stands up. "I'm— I'm going to —" He gestures at the stairs.

"Wait—" Remus starts.

But Peter has already cut halfway across the room, pyjama'd back disappearing into the crowd. Remus stands up, calling his name. Peter ignores him and Remus watches him disappear up the staircase.

"Fuck," he says to himself.

Lily takes his wrist and pulls him back down. "I think he just needs time," she says.

"We don't have time." Remus glances at the grandfather clock across the room. It's almost two-thirty already; the portkey is due to take them at four sharp. "I should go talk to him. Make amends while we're all still together. It'll be harder once I'm gone." Speaking freely about it makes it worse.

And Lily shakes her head, of course she does; the one she left behind is crumpled in a heap of dark robes and lovelessness across the room.

"No," she says decisively. "I don't think so. I think what he needs is time."

"He's had time," Remus counters. "A year of it. Alone."

"While we've been fighting."

"While we've been hiding. He didn't have that luxury."

"And he doesn't have the luxury of bad blood, or of lycanthropy."

"Neither does James. We still take care of him."

Lily rubs a hand over his forearm. "Remus," she says gently. "You can't fix this one."

Remus digs his fingertips into his eyes. "Yeah," he agrees. "Yeah. Guess I can't."

James appears, seemingly out of thin air, between their chairs. His hot breath hits the back of Remus' neck. He smells of victory and companionship like he used to after a Quidditch win.

"Where did Peter go?" he asks, voice low enough that it stays between them.

"He needs time," Lily says. "He'll be alright. Did you manage to calm everybody down?"

"Yeah, for the most part. They're still upset," James sighs, like that's the worst thing in the world. Perhaps it is.

“They’re scared. They want a revolution. Been trying to tell them it doesn’t work like that.”

“So long as we don’t have the Ministry,” Lily agrees, and sounds properly exhausted.

“Yeah, well, they’re all tired. And scared. And I think being angry is helping them.”

“Then maybe we should be letting them.”

“Easier said than done,” James mutters.

Remus glances around the room. People are watching them. “I seriously think we should go check on Peter,” he says.

James presses his chin to the top of Remus’ shoulder. Remus tries to shrug him off but he stays. When Remus glances sidelong at him, James is staring intently at the map.

“Hey,” he says. “Hey, look.”

Remus and Lily both look down at the map. James sticks a hand out, arm over Remus’ shoulder, and points to the spread of the second floor.

Amelie Bullstrode is unmoving in the girls’ lavatory.

“Oh,” Remus murmurs. “Bingo.”

They elect to leave Mary in the common room. It feels fitting, this final mission being theirs, for just the three of them; they abandon the cloak, because it feels better if they

can all see each other, Remus thinks, and the others seem to agree.

James holds his bat, Lily holds her knife, and Remus, a sort of weightstone between them, holds the map. His heart thrums with the thrill of the hunt as he leads them through the corridors; forget full moon, the wolf is alive now. They don't speak. Remus glances at Lily a few times, and the shadows seem to consume her for how tightly she sticks to the wall.

Down the stairs they go, close to one another — down a staircase which shifts and leads them off down a conjoining corridor, and from there, descending the steps of a tight, winding staircase, with narrow walls and darkness below, which seems to make James nauseous. They come out on a third-floor corridor and, remiss to run into a patrolling teacher, clamber over a high marble banister onto the second floor ledge below, looking out over the startling drop to the entrance hall, which looms like a chasm under them. It makes Remus' stomach turn to hang over the maw of stone, but not like seeing Peter did.

Everything feels like it's sitting on the wrong angle, he thinks, as they jog down the hallway in a flurry, past empty portraits and under unlit candles, clawed into the wall. Like the anatomy of the castle has changed, like it's caught a disease. Or maybe that's them. Or maybe that's him.

James throws out an arm. Remus slams into it. He glances down at the map, panting; they're alone. Both teachers are on the seventh floor. Luck is with them tonight.

"James?" Lily whispers.

James puts a finger to his lips. Slowly, he starts off again, heels first as he walks, trying to keep his weight off the balls

of his feet. Remus follows close behind, scanning the second floor on the map. Bullstrode is still unmoving in the bathroom. Yes. Yes. Yes.

Their names score closer and closer to hers, all a cluster of letters, overlapping so it makes a sort of quagmire of their consonants. James pulls a halt outside the bathroom and then glances at Lily with his hand on the doorknob, as if unsure.

"Do you want to...?" he hisses, and gestures to the 'GIRLS' sign.

Lily rolls her eyes to the ceiling. "Are you twelve? Go!"

James presses the handle down and shoulders his way inside. Remus crushes in after him, and Lily follows, the three of them crowding into the doorway.

Inside, it's dark, none of the lights on. Remus gets a confused impression of stark white moonlight across the tiled floor, and something dark moving in the corner. He squints, trying to make out what it is. Lily tenses at his side and seems to draw breath, as if to say something, before letting it out of her slowly.

Very gingerly, James reaches over and puts his hand inside Remus' jacket. He fishes around for a second and pulls out Remus' lighter, flicking it open.

Flame bursts alive at its tip. An orange glare hits the walls, flickering over the stone, and the tiles come alive with it. Remus blinks and blinks again, and stares.

The thing in the corner is a girl, with a narrow, puffy face and small eyes. She's sitting against the wall with her legs splayed out in front of her, robes in a tangle around her,

hair matted and wet. She's covered in gunk, some of it green and oily, most of it black as hot tar. Her face is dirty and her eyes are perfectly blank, staring at them, the whites a little too wide, as if they've sunken into the pupils.

James, the bravest of them, takes the first step forward. The girl's eyes flick to him.

"Hey," he coos, like you might greet a feral cat. "Hey. Hi. Are you Amelie?"

A muscle in her neck jumps. She doesn't respond.

"James," Remus says warningly. "James." He tries to reach out for his arm but James steps closer to Amelie, out of reach.

"We're not going to hurt you," James carries on, oblivious to Remus' rising panic. "I promise. Did the teachers do this? Or another student?"

He probably thinks they swirled her or something. Sirius and James swirled Snape once, in second year, Remus remembers, before Sirius started having nightmares and jumping at the sight of seventh years, before the war dominated the papers and the dementors moved to James' town. They laughed and joked and plunged his dark head into the toilet before Herbology one afternoon, water splashing onto the floor, and Remus stood nearby like a documentarian and watched and did nothing. It feels like a century ago now.

Amelie makes a croaky noise in the back of her throat. Her eyes roll in her skull.

"James," Remus says again. This time, he manages to force himself forward a step and grabs James' arm as tightly as

he can, tight enough that it might bruise by tomorrow, if they make it to tomorrow. "James, step away."

James tries to shake him off. "She's just a kid."

The wolf snarls. "That's not a kid," Remus says. "James. That's not a fucking kid."

One of Amelie's hands drops to the floor. It lets out a noise sort of like it's choking. Run. Run. Run, the wolf says. And it's rare that he's afraid, very rare.

"Of course it's a kid," James says. He wrenches his arm away from Remus and crosses the rest of the way to Amelie's side, crouching in front of it.

Lily's eyes are blown wide. "I don't think..."

Amelie rolls its head around to look at James, white eyes peering through him. It reaches one of its hands up to grab at the front of his leather jacket.

James puts down the baseball bat. "Hey—"

And it launches at him.

"Fuck!" James yells. Amelie wrangles its white hands into his dark hair and slams James hard into the wall, face-first. There's a crack of bone and James swears, legs kicking out, trying to rip those pale claws from his scalp with both hands.

Remus doesn't think. He just moves, running across the room and grabbing Amelie, wrangling an arm around its neck and hurtling it into the ground away from James. It skitters and snarls at him and the wolf growls right back. Two beasts see one another.

"No!" James yells, and he's on his feet, grabbing Remus and hauling him away. His glasses are cracked along the lens. "Don't—"

Multiple things happen at once; Lily screams, Amelie kicks Remus in the back of the leg and sends him crashing into James, who careens into the wall, and the lighter goes out as James drops it into a puddle. The room goes dark again. Remus' chest finds James', their frantic hearts beating rabbit-fast against each other. Amelie kicks him again and Lily hurtles into their midst, trying to push Amelie into the wall. It dodges her and shoves her right back.

In the blackness, every shape is indistinct. There's a shout of pain and a crack. Remus pulls himself up against the wall in time for the beast to throw itself at him, teeth digging into the flesh of his shoulder. Remus grabs it by the front of its robes and hurtles it into the wall twice.

"Stop!" James yells. Remus isn't sure who to. A tile underfoot cracks in half and sends Remus stumbling. There's a flicker of fire; James is trying to open the lighter again, and it sparks weakly, lighting his face and the looming, mad visage of Amelie standing over his shoulder—

"NO!" Remus bellows. He grabs James and throws him behind himself, in time for Amelie to barrel into him, its hands scrabbling over his chest, its teeth gnashing at his neck. It has a wand in the pocket of its robes, Remus can feel it, but it isn't using it.

On instinct, he elbows it across the face, then sinks a hand into the pocket of its robes and takes its wand, shoving it into the back pocket of his jeans. It shrieks with inhuman rage, the sort of sound that shouldn't be able to come out of

a little girl. Moonlight catches the profile of the side of its face. It lunges at Remus.

Remus goes to dodge and slips on the wet floor. He remembers, as he tumbles and staggers, there used to be a ghost here, in this bathroom. He never met it, but it never left, so he supposes that would be why. Whatever it was, it's gone now. He wonders if death eaters can kill ghosts.

He hits the floor on his back and it knocks the wind out of him. Crack, go his ribs against the floor, heavy like lead. Remus gasps and hacks, something acrid in the back of his neck that's rising like the hot sun.

Amelie descends on him. It yells something, perhaps a name, and plunges its thumbs nail-down into Remus' eyes. There is burning pain — wrongness. Remus howls, kicking out at it, but it's strong, stronger than its body should allow, and its thumbs dig in deeper. Terror grips him; its hot hands extend around his neck and squeeze.

Someone yells. There's a sharp sound of impact, wet and biting, and Amelie goes limp. She falls onto him. Remus shoves her off, pawing at himself; there's blood on his lips, in his nose. He blinks and blinks and feels at his face desperately, at his eyes, palming them, touching them. They're still there. He blinks and sees the flicker of fire again, across the room. He can still see.

"Oh, Merlin!" Lily says, over him. He thinks it's her, anyway. It's too dark to see. She hits the ground beside him. "Remus —"

"I'm okay," he gasps, almost sobbing with panic. Hunted is the word for it. Hunted is how the wolf feels, howling its protest, almost one with him now. Hunted is the bite of

panic and the press of thumbnails and being here, in a castle that would burn them if it could. "I'm okay. I'm okay."

She throws her arms around him, squeezing tight. They both stink of toilet and fear. "I thought she— I thought—"

"I can see. They're still there. I'm okay." Remus wraps his hands around her shoulders, around the back of her neck, feeling her hair against his thumbs. He tries to hold himself in one piece. "I'm okay."

James crawls to them, slipping on the wet floor. "Moony. Moony—"

"I'm okay," Remus says. He leans out a hand to grab James and then the three of them are one body, then, as James hits them and his arms cross tight around Remus' shaking spine.

Lily laughs breathlessly. "I hit her over the head with the tap," she says. "I pulled it out of the sink. Looked rusty enough."

"Ha," Remus murmurs. He breathes in the smell of James' jacket. "Fuck."

"Whatever she is," James says, too loud for this room, "I... she's not..."

"Human?" Remus offers.

James' grip tightens just a bit. "Dunno," he says.

Amelie lies limp a few feet from them. Remus keeps waiting for it to twitch to life like something from a horror movie. Like James' first boggart. But she stays still, dead to the world. The stench of blood grows thick and stale.

"Somebody definitely heard that," James says. "We should go."

"Right," Remus murmurs. "Who's hurt?"

"I'm okay," Lily says. She flexes her hand against his shoulder.

"Uh, think she broke my nose," James puts in, bunged-up. "But aside from that."

Remus rubs at his eyes compulsively, to make sure they're still there. "I'm okay, too," he says. "Come on."

They rise to their feet together, a conquering army alive between them. James heaves them towards the door, lion that he is, and then pauses and says, "Oh. We didn't talk to her."

Lily goes still. Then she laughs, a bit hysterically. "Ha. Hahaha. Oh, I need to lie down."

"I can carry it," Remus offers. He coughs. "Her. I can carry her."

James elbows him. "I can do it—"

"No you can't," Remus snorts. He staggers off James and to the beast's side, sliding his arms under it. Its long, dark hair hangs in tails over his arm. It's heavy, but not too heavy for him. Or maybe that's just adrenaline. The world lurches, spinning, then stills.

Something falls out of its robes, landing in a puddle of water at Remus' feet. James stoops to pick it up, flipping it over in his hands.

"What is it?" Lily asks.

"A book," James murmurs. "A diary, I think."

Remus shakes his head. "Later," he groans, struggling under Amelie's weight.

"We should take one of the hidden pathways near here," James says. He puts the diary in his pocket, tucked into his jacket, which squeaks in protest. "Behind the tapestry down the way. Come on."

He leads them out of the bathroom. Remus follows without thinking about it, watching James' back as they lurch back into the stark, cubist darkness. He thinks he would like to exist forever in this moment with them, even with a monster in his arms, to just see their backs ahead of him, short hair and heavy shoulders, and never have to see anything else. But Remus has wanted many things in his life, and he's learned one thing: he'll never get to have most of them.

Maybe it's the sentimentality, or maybe it's James' shit hearing. Something catches them off guard, and Remus is the first to hear it. He staggers to a stop and lashes out a hand to grab Lily, almost dropping Amelie.

"Wait," he says, into the stagnant dark. "Wait. Stop."

Lily and James pull to a stop. They turn to look at Remus. They're about five minutes from the common room, on a deserted, mostly-unused stretch of corridor on the fifth floor, lined with high windows, through which moonlight pierces like a knife.

Remus raises his head and stares around. He hears it again.

"What is it, Remus?" James asks distractedly.

Remus shifts Amelie in his arms. Her head lolls against his arm and he wants to drop her but doesn't. "Shh," he whispers, and listens again.

Quiet. Perhaps too quiet.

"James," he murmurs. "James, the map."

James reaches over into Remus' jacket and pulls it out. The crinkle as he unfolds it is too loud. Everything is too loud.

"Huh," James says, as he peers at it. "It's too dark, let me—" And he shuffles the map into a patch of moonlight, trying to find the corridor they're on.

Then, he stares.

"What?" Lily asks.

But Remus already knows. He kick James in the shins and James shoots a terrified look down the corridor and takes off running. It says a lot about the three of them that in the same moment, Remus and Lily launch right after him.

A sparking red spell flies over their heads and burns into the wall ahead, burrowing lines into the stone like iron wool. Hot flecks of stone, near molten, flake off to the floor and hiss against the carpet. Smoke billows and a small fire catches. James hurdles right over it, flame licking up at him. Thank god wizards don't know what a fucking fire alarm is, Remus thinks, and dodges around it, ducking under

another spell, which burns black claws into the ceiling above, carnage blossoming above.

"Teacher!" James huffs, hurtling around a corner ahead. "It's a teacher! Run!"

"We're running!" Lily shouts back, half-laughing despite it all. "Remus, drop her, if you have to—"

The fourth. The fourth. Sharp incisors tear wide open in Remus' stomach and begin to eat him. "No!" he grunts. "No way!"

"Stop!" the teacher behind them yells. "Stupefy! Stupefy! Stupefy!"

Remus dives forwards to avoid the stunning spells, which fly over his head; there's a shout from ahead, James, James, James. Remus steadies himself and looks up. Lily is in a heap on the ground.

"Shit!" James is yelling. He kneels to grab her, throwing her limp arm around his shoulders and hauling her up to drag her.

Immediately, Remus goes to put Amelie down. She can stay here, for all he cares. Lily's more important.

But James looks up at him, then, and around his bloody nose his face is so wild that he doesn't look like himself. "Don't!" he shouts.

"You can't take Lily alone!" Remus yells back, staggering to his side.

"Watch me!" James grunts, almost a growl, and he begins to drag her, pitching with her weight, feet slipping under him.

The teacher is gaining on them — Remus can hear her running footsteps nearing the corner. They've got bare seconds.

"I'm leaving Amelie," he says. "I'm—"

"NO!" James yells. He reaches his free hand over, and, for the third time this evening, dives into Remus' pocket, pulling out—

"No!" Remus says. "No, James, don't—"

"Wingardium Leviosa!" James hollers, waving Amelie's wand.

Lily's body hurtles up into open air, her limbs dangling around herself. Behind them, the teacher skids around the corner and hurls a killing curse at them, which misses James by an inch, so close that Remus is almost attending his funeral already.

"Fuck!" Remus yells. "You fucking idiot! They know we're here, they know—"

"Doesn't matter!" James shouts. He waves his wand and Lily's ragdoll body goes hurtling down the hallway like she's on a rollercoaster. "Come on!"

"I hate you!"

"I know!"

Remus tightens his grip on Amelie and runs after James. They tear off down the corridor again, James holding Amelie's wand aloft before him as he careens Lily around the next corner, which is so sharp that she slams into the wall.

Another killing curse jets at them; Remus barges James to the side and they both stumble and almost fall as it whizzes by, ringing with the high whirl of death's close passing. Thinking fast, Remus spins around, reaches into his jacket and yanks the revolver out: he fumbles the safety off with one hand, Amelie almost dripping out of his arms, and fires blindly into the dark.

Miraculously, the teacher goes down with a shout. The sound of her wand hitting the floor rings in the echo of the gunshot, its rattle like a snake.

"Holy shit! Good shot! We don't have long!" James yells. Remus pulls Amelie back into his grip and they careen around the next corner, Lily hanging before them, suspended in open air. "They're coming—"

"GO!" Remus shouts. Ahead, ahead is the Fat Lady, staring at them both through pearly darkness like they've gone mad, and perhaps they have.

James hurtles to a stop before the portrait. Lily drops and he barely catches her. The pale driftwood of her arms folds over his shoulders.

"Managot!" he shouts. "Fucking managot! Let us in—"

"So rude!" the Fat Lady says, scandalised. She swings wide open.

James hurtles inside, dragging Lily with him, and Remus climbs in just as thundering footsteps ring out down the hallway behind them. He maps it in his head: they must have come through the fireplace in McGonagall's old quarters. Bastards. And a whole host of them, by the sounds of the shouting and running.

The portrait will stall them, but not for long. Remus hurls it closed behind them and turns to face the common room, which is unpleasantly bright, a mash of colours. There are faces staring at him, people asking questions.

"Someone get Peter!" he shouts. "Someone, please—"

A dark figure, third or fourth year, takes off up the boys' stairs. Remus drops Amelie on the floor, close to the fire. He runs a hand over his aching eyes and stares around for James and Lily, who are sitting in a heap at the foot of the portrait hole, James gasping, Lily very still. They're draped across one another like they have the right to be.

"Remus!" Mary grabs his arm, there all of a sudden.
"Remus, you're hurt—"

"It's fine," Remus snaps. He raises his voice to call over the din. "James, you're— you—"

"I'm sorry," James gasps. "I'm sorry. Fuck. She's okay, I think. Just stunned."

"I know that! You could've— she could've—"

Something slams against the portrait frame from the outside, trying to kick it in. The common room goes silent, and then there's a mad rush for the dorm stairs as dozens of lions retreat from their fight, scrambling, fighting, pushing one another to get up there first.

Remus drags Amelie by the robes to the floor, heaving her to James and Lily and dropping her on them. James flinches hard, a hand stuttering over Lily's head. Mary sits beside them, looking very lost.

"You." Remus fishes in his pocket for the portkey and yanks the flat cap out. It was a gift for James for Christmas. "You almost got her killed."

"What happened?" Dorcas demands, dropping to Mary's side.

"I didn't, though," James defends, ignoring her. He reaches out to touch Lily's head again, as if to prove she's there. "She's alive."

"And they've picked up on you! They know you were here!"

"So what! We got what we wanted, didn't we!"

"We didn't—" Remus glances up. "*No!*"

But it's a second too late. Snape is there, standing over James, and at that moment he hurtles his wand down and shouts, "Sectumsempra!"

James careens left to dodge and there is a flurry of movement and shouting; the curse hits Mary across the side of the face and she gasps, shouting with pain. Dorcas yells out, stands up and slams into Snape, tackling him. In a feral sort of frenzy, they grapple at one another, staggering and stumbling like drunkards. Lily's head rolls against the floor, falling out of James' lap.

The kicking and slamming against the portrait gets louder. Remus hears the death eaters trying spells; the portrait is resistant, but it won't be for long. Only until they try fiendfyre or something similarly awful.

"We're running out of time!" Remus shouts, looking at the clock. Two minutes. Two minutes until four. He hopes to Merlin or god or whatever that the clock's not running fast.

Snape tries to stun Dorcas, who knocks his wand out of his hand, winds up and punches him across the face. James cheers. Snape staggers, bleeding from the nose. Remus wants to lie down, preferably forever.

Strewn over his legs, Amelie groans faintly.

"Oh, fuck," Remus says. Now they're really running out of time. He thinks of her soulless eyes and wonders if he'd prefer to be out in the corridor with the death eaters.

Movement across the room. Peter staggers down the stairs, face pale, eyes huge. "What—"

"Come with us!" Remus shouts. "The portkey goes in a minute. Come with us! You don't have to stay here!"

Peter stares at him. "What?"

"They'll look for you, but one of us will keep you safe," Remus promises. "You can stay with James or— or go with Lily, she's going overseas!"

Across the room, Snape is clawing at James, who is up on his feet, squaring off against him alongside Dorcas. The two tear at one another, throwing punches like schoolboys. James wrenches Snape's head back by his long hair and slams him up against a wall, and Remus watches Peter flinch.

"I—" Peter says. "I can't."

"Why not?"

"I don't want to... they'll try to find me." His voice cracks. "You don't know what they'll do, Remus."

"We can keep you safe," Remus promises. "All of us have been okay. And we've missed you."

"Motherfucker!" James yells across the room, as Snape throttles him. "Get off—"

"You have?" Peter asks, and his face breaks. Remus watches his eyes fill with tears.

"Of course we have," Remus says, not stopping to think if it's the truth or not, if he should say it or not. "Of course we've missed you. Come with us."

Thirty seconds. Amelie stirs again, hands flexing in and out of claws against the carpet. Someone hurtles a spell against the wall outside and it seems to rattle the whole castle.

"Come on!" Remus raises his voice to shout, not looking away from Peter. "The portkey, come on, come touch it—"

James launches himself across the room to Remus' side, skidding on his forearms across the carpet. He lifts Lily's hand up to touch the cap and presses his own finger to it. His bloody nose is bloodier. He's going to have one hell of a shiner.

Dorcas shoves Snape at the fireplace and runs to Mary's side, kneeling with them all, looking so exhilarated that she seems like a firstie again.

"Well, chaps," she says, and coughs, panting. "It's been good seeing you all—"

"Oh, shut up," James snorts. He grabs her hand and presses it to the cap, alongside Mary's.

Dorcas stares, and then beams. "Fuck this place," she agrees.

James raises his voice. "Pete! Come on, there's no time—"

Peter still looks uncertain. "My stuff— my—"

"Ten seconds!" Remus calls. He reaches out a hand to Peter, straining to keep his own on the portkey as he stretches as far as he can. "Peter, come on!"

Peter's face changes. "Okay!" He breaks into a sprint, running at Remus, hand reaching out for him.

Snape rears up from his place by the fireplace and runs for the portrait hole. He jumps past James' swinging fist and hurtles the Fat Lady back, the dark hallway gasping open before him.

A flurry of spells launch past him into the room, bouncing off the walls, burning up the wallpaper. Multiple people scream. Remus strains his fingers out towards Peter, who lunges for him— they meet eyes for a second, a bare second — and the portkey yanks Remus off the floor and away, Peter's face whisked into the ether behind them, his hand a millimetre from Remus' but not close enough.

Chapter End Notes

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LOSING HIM

Chapter Notes

oh this one was hard to write. my chronic migraines have been a Motherfucker this week. i'm not at all happy with it, but if i draft it again i'll lose my fucking head, and it's more of a bridge to the next chapter than anything, so i hope it brings some joy and excitement . the next one might be a few days; it's going to be quite long, and very plotty, and i desperately want to get it right.

recommended listening: back pack by ajj. big delivery service vibes. enjoy my loves!

tws: captivity, kidnapping, injury, conflict

ps: i havent had time to respond to the comments on the last chapter and i think if i look at my computer for more than ten more seconds my brain is going to explode like a ready meal in a microwave. but rest assured ive seen them and every single person who commented: i love u so much.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"Blue or green?" Lily asks.

James looks away from the shop window, finds her gaze down the aisle. "What?"

She holds up two packets of bunting, lashed in stripes and spots, and wiggles them at him. "Blue or green? Which would he prefer?"

"Oh. Erm, his favourite colour is red."

"Yeah, but red's an angry colour." Lily wrinkles her nose.
"We're not doing red."

"Okay," James agrees. "No red. Blue's nice."

"Got it." Lily chucks the blue bunting into the basket on James' arm. "I think we should get one of those round punnets of cupcakes. The ones with the three types? They're a bit expensive, but he's got a sweet tooth."

"He doesn't like strawberry stuff," James puts in. "We can have the jam ones."

"Sounds like a plan." She reaches out to take his wrist, pulling James around the corner into the next aisle. A muggle shop worker pushes past, looking harried. Remus quit his job last week; for the moment, anyway. They're letting him transfer to a Sainsbury's in Merthyr Tydfil, the town Remus is moving to after James' birthday, when they leave the apartment behind in a bare few weeks. Less than three weeks, now, actually. This month has come with melancholy; it will leave like a sickness.

"We should get ginger ale, too," James puts in. "Closest thing to butterbeer, right? And he likes chocolate. Something chocolate. Those funny little stars with the faces."

"We're not made of money," Lily teases. Nevertheless, she obliges. That's one of the things James will miss about her when she's gone to Germany. To a point, she is indulgent.

He scuffs his foot against the squeaky linoleum Tesco floor and peers around as she looks through a rack of wrapping paper. It's early, not yet seven, and the only muggles around

are Tesco employees and the odd old person with a zimmer frame or a cane. This end of Lambeth curls up against the Thames, which glows with dawn past the buildings outside. The day feels fresh and untainted.

"They've still got their Christmas wrapping paper out for sale," Lily laughs, showing James a roll covered in silver Santas. "It's March. I love muggles."

"Maybe it's in readiness for next Christmas," James suggests, yawning and rubbing a hand through his hair.

"Maybe they never take it down," Lily contends. "Christmas all year. Oh, look, that's the discount aisle--"

James follows her around the abandoned shop like a lost puppy, not paying much attention to what she's saying. It's far too early to reasonably expect a coherent conversation with him. It's been a week since the early March moon, and Remus is still asleep back in the apartment. Marlene's spot on the camp bed has been taken by Dorcas, though the camp bed has been moved to the first bedroom now. It's crowded with the five of them and it still feels lonely. James envies how Mary will never have to be alone.

"You reckon we'll all see each other for Christmas this year?" James asks, watching Lily paw through various packets of crisps.

She turns to glance at him, only briefly. "Maybe," she says. "It would be nice, wouldn't it? We could have Christmas dinner in some muggle pub. Spoons, maybe, in whatever town Remus is in, or you."

"I might still be in London."

"Then we'll drag you to Wales for the day. Far prettier."

"Remus won't be near the sea," James warns. "And 'parrently the valleys are rough."

"Remus is a rough person," Lily contends. "He'll like it."

James stays quiet for a bit, chewing the inside of his cheek. Lily finishes her shopping list and leads him to one of the tills, chatting with the tired-looking cashier as morning sunlight greets the floor by the windows, lighting it up in warm tones. He and Lily take a bag each and set off through the doors side by side, out into the cold morning and the bracing wind.

"What did you get him, then?" she asks, as they trek down to the riverside, through a gap between shops.

James huffs a breath, watching it billow in front of him like dragonfire. "I've sort of already given Moony my gift," he says. "The cloak."

"Well, that's a bit of a shit gift," Lily offers. "You didn't even have to pay for it."

"I got him a cardigan, too. And chocolate," James says, looking askance at Lily. "Yourself?"

"Well," she sighs. "I've gotten Remus a copy of *Das Kapital* and a skateboard. And knee pads. For safety."

"Ideally to be used simultaneously? All three?"

"He'd enjoy that."

"You know him so well."

"It's my compassionate nature," Lily snarks, and jabs at him with her elbow before looping an arm into his. She sighs

again, more mournfully. "It's Mary's birthday soon, too. And yours. And then we're all... adults."

"I still say we should have the 'adult' thing come at eighteen, like the muggles," James protests without conviction.

"That would mean we would all be stuck in that flat for another year."

"Exactly."

Lily breathes out heavily through her nose, sunlight misting through the silver mesh. "Dorcas turned seventeen in October," she says. "She was telling me the other day one of the Gryffindors set off fireworks at breakfast, in the Great Hall. All of them got detention for months. Blood Quills."

"That'll be our beloved Secretary of Education."

"We should have left her more dung bombs."

"No time for it now."

Lily pinches him on the inside of his arm. "No time for morbidity," she tells him. "We can bring her more if it'll cheer you up. Early Birthday present. Hell. Early Christmas present. If you want. Doing it the muggle way."

"Nothing more muggleish than wanting things to come too soon," James says muleishly.

"Hey." She pinches him again. "Nothing more muggleish than waiting for things to change on their own, more like."

"Thought you loved muggles, you said. It's not an insult."

"Yes, well." Lily looks out across the rippling river. She sighs and seems to give up on this. "Love you," she says.

"Love you. Sorry for being difficult."

"Sorry for making things difficult."

"If we keep saying sorry to each other out here we'll get home after he's woken up."

Lily tugs on him. "Then let's hurry up."

James is a dog with a rodent in its teeth as he drums his fingers on the kitchen table, trying not to make eye contact with Lily, who sits across from him, poking at his legs with her socked toes. Dorcas is sprawled in a chair beside her, face turned up towards the ceiling with an air of forgiveness about her. She's less bruised than she was when they rescued her, but the cut on her lip is going to scar. Mary sits on Lily's other side. They hold hands around the back of Lily's chair.

"Thought he didn't like spectacle?" Dorcas asks, breaking the silence.

James shrugs. One of the pins holding the bunting to the top of the fridge falls and he gets up to fix it. "It's only us here. He won't get embarrassed. Still reckon we should've gotten red."

Lily rolls her eyes at him. Her socks scuff against the floor, probably generating static, or however that shit works. "You can run down and get the red ones if you want. Still not too late."

"He'll be up soon," Mary puts in. She paws at the bandage on her cheek. The wound under it is probably already beginning to take the shape of a scar. "It's been a week since the moon."

"This one was a bad one again," James grimaces. Reflexively, he presses a hand over his ribs. The stitches are going to have to come out early, the day before they move, probably, which is only a few days after the next moon.

He feels Lily's eyes burn into his back. She doesn't say anything, though. James finishes pinning the bunting back up and shuffles back to his seat. They've sprinkled gold confetti all over the table, a plate of cupcakes in the middle, and it's almost nine in the morning now, a lie-in for any of them, with how early they've been getting up since the raid on Hogwarts fucked up their sleep schedules not ten days ago.

"You snore, James," Dorcas comments, yawning. "It was keeping me up."

"Oh, apologies, Your Majesty," James scoffs. "I'll cast a silencing spell on myself next time. Oh, wait."

"I miss the dorm in Gryffindor tower," Dorcas says mournfully. "It was so quiet. I was the only one in there."

Like Peter, James thinks, without saying it. "Lily snores, too, and you put up with her for years."

Lily jabs him under the table. "I don't," she snorts. "You, on the other hand, could wake the dead."

"Wouldn't that be a useful talent to have right now?"

"You could really start pulling your weight!" Lily agrees.

"The sooner we don't have to share a room anymore, the better," Mary agrees, with less timidity than usual. She smiles at James. "She's not awake yet?"

"Nah. We would know if she was. Screams bloody murder this time in the morning."

"Well," Lily offers. "I actually put up those silencing runes I've been wanting to put up last night. Don't know if they work yet. Suppose we'll see."

"She sleeps about twenty hours a day anyway," Dorcas says, with a put-on sigh. "One of these days she just won't wake up anymore."

James curls up his lips a bit, watching the tabletop intently. "Maybe," he says.

"I don't think she's going down yet," Lily exhales. "She bit me the other day." She offers James her arm, on which sits a bright green plaster, almost the colour of her eyes.

"Pretty sure she tried to whack Remus' teeth out the day before yesterday," James agrees. "Speaking of Remus. Hey, Moony."

In the doorway, Remus stares at the spread with a look of mild surprise on his tired, grey face.

"Oh," he says. "Oh, that's today."

James gets up and ushers him into a chair at the head of the table, sitting perpendicular to him. "Happy birthday. Penblwydd hapus."

"It's 'pen-bloithe'," Remus tells him absently, still looking a bit shell-shocked. "With a hard 'th'. Not 'penbloowd'."

"Right. I'll remember that," James agrees fairly.

"We've got gifts," Lily says, grabbing a chocolate iced cupcake and planting it in front of Remus. "And we've got food, and we were going to spend the morning out down at Camden Market, if you're up for it, we can take the underground down there; if not, that's okay, though! We can do something else. And we wanted to get back home in time to listen to *Direct Action* tonight, all of us together."

Remus stares from Lily to the cupcake. "That sounds good," he says, and wipes a spot of sleep from his eye. It sits on the side of his long nose and James flicks it off for him.

"We should go to that Chinese place again," he puts in. "You know, in the, like, inner bit of the market? Where it was all crowded last time. The sheltered bit. They do good orange chicken. You ate all mine last time, Remus."

Remus looks up at him then, properly looking at James for the first time today. "You can't come."

James stares. "What?"

"It's too dangerous." Remus plonks his hands down on the table, tugging at the undersides of his nails, dragging scarred fingertips down over the folds of his knuckles. He holds tension in his hands and raises it from birth. "You can't."

James shakes his head. "It's never been too dangerous before," he shoots back.

"That was before your face was on the front page of *The Prophet* for setting off the Trace at Hogwarts and kidnapping two students. They're more desperate for you than for him right now, that's saying a lot."

"I can take the cloak! That's what I've been doing for the past--"

But Remus looks firm now, shaking his head once. "We can have my birthday in here," he says, like it's final. "Sorry. I'm not... we're not doing that. Okay? We can do something else."

Hot anger rises in the cavity of James' chest. "I can take care of myself," he starts.

"And I can survive without a birthday party for one year," Remus snaps.

James goes silent. He feels cowed and stupid and still angry, still bitter. Sometimes, it's like Remus doesn't understand anything.

"I just want us to have one last thing together before you go," James says.

Remus winces. "I'll be here for your birthday."

"You're leaving the day after."

"We all are."

"That doesn't make it better."

Remus gets up in a rush. "I'm not doing this today," he chokes, and he walks out, leaving the cupcake untouched in front of his empty seat.

"Remus!" James gets up to follow him and smacks his hip against the cutlery drawer on the way around the table, knocking it open.

Rattling and whirring and beeping fills the room; all of their sneakoscopes are shoved in there with the knives and forks. They haven't shut up since last week.

"Fuck," James says, and slams the drawer shut.

Pads,

So after the debacle of Remus' birthday party the other day, Lily's buried herself back into fixing Dorcas, Remus has buried himself in sorting letters, and I'm trying to figure the Amelie business out. No new developments on that, by the way.

Anyway, Remus and I keep stopping talking to each other and then starting again. It's hard to know where I stand with him. I thought he'd forgiven me for the raid the other day when he told me he's not angry, but he just seems angry again now. He told me earlier that he doesn't know if he can trust me when I'm like this. Like what? Like what, Sirius?

Anyway, suppose that asking you won't help, will it? I need a painkiller. I've been getting headaches. We gave him his birthday presents and he didn't even seem happy about it. Guess mine will probably be twice as miserable. Mary's is a few days before it -- Lily's been saying we should have a joint party on the twenty-seventh, more of a goodbye than a birthday party. I don't think Remus will get me anything for some reason. He's smart like that, smart enough to know when something is breaking.

I still think this is the stupidest, most terrible idea. I get that we all feel stagnant and I get that we all feel scared and I get that Remus wants to run off and save Wales, I do. I get that Lily's got nothing tying her to me and I get that

Mary thinks you're dead, and I get that. I don't know. I get it. But I wish we could all stop and just think for two seconds and realise this is a fucked up terrible plan and going it alone is going to be what kills us. I would only ever say this to you, but I think they're both being stupid and irrational. But saying that won't change it, so.

My letters have been getting longer; have you noticed that? Remus' are getting shorter. I see them over his shoulder when we write together. He has less to say and his handwriting is bigger, maybe so it takes up the same amount of space while saying less. I don't know how he could run out of stuff to tell you. It feels like I'll never have enough time to get it all out of me.

Anyway. I'm surviving, and that's what matters. If they leave I won't die. WHEN they leave I won't die. I'll kip on Order turf and chase dead leads, I'll keep my head on straight and I'll write letters to them, even if they never get them. I'll need more shoelaces won't I? More of this shit to lug around with me. I've written enough to you that it weighs down my bag.

I miss you. I always do. Every single time. And it sort of sucks that I can't do what the others are doing. I just can't move on. Maybe that's the problem. Maybe that's the problem in me.

This is getting morbid and I don't want to get into that shit today, so I'm going to get back to trying to fix our toothy problem. Stay safe!

Yours,

Prongs.

Three days after Remus' birthday, it's James' turn to bring her food.

"Good luck," Lily says, piling a plate with leftover beef stew. She pushes a packet of Haribos into his palm. "See if she likes them any more."

"Right," James replies, trying not to sound dubious. He goes to hug her around the side and she ducks away.

It's still dark outside, because for how quickly Spring is coming, it isn't quick enough, and most evenings strain their dark hands hours over daytime, swallowing mornings and charring nighttime. Midnight overstays its welcome.

Remus nods to James as he leaves the kitchen. James smiles at him and Remus doesn't smile back.

The door to the second bedroom is padlocked five times. They spent the first evening of March drilling locks into the wood with a pocket screwdriver and force of will, and Lily's runes sit on scraps of fine-spun fabric along the bottom of the door, the type you use to strain out cheese curds. Their dark markings are etched in with whiteboard marker.

James hesitates outside of the door for a bit, wondering if he can convince Lily to take tonight instead. None of them have spoken today; Mary and Dorcas have been out getting Dorcas new clothes, since all hers were left behind at Hogwarts, and Lily's been running deliveries, and Remus has been asleep mostly. He feels like if he tries to use it too much his tongue will fall out of his mouth.

Remus probably wouldn't be much better though. James sighs and unlocks each padlock set into the door, before turning the handle and stepping inside, over the battlement of runes and into the darkness.

They keep the lights off. She doesn't like the dark. Even in the dim, James can see her, though, sitting on the floor at the foot of the bed with her hands twined in thick rope, wrists knotted together against the bedpost. She's asleep, or pretending to be, eyes closed, face tilted skyward. There is blood on her bottom lip.

James kicks the door closed behind himself and clears his throat. "Grub," he says loudly.

Amelie's head twitches. She groans in the back of her throat, something close to a growl. "Leave."

"Not leaving anytime soon," James tells her. "This is my apartment." Not for much longer, but she doesn't need to know that.

She opens her eyes and stares straight at him, a look so piercing it could cut glass. Amelie's got this look about her like she could find prey in any room.

All the windows are taped up full of newspaper, with all the dates scribbled out in marker. There's no way she knows where they are. She can't get free, either; if she could, she would've done it already.

But James is fucking terrified of her.

"Beef stew," he says, grunting as he sits cross-legged on the floor across from her. "Are you going to throw it at me?"

Amelie gnashes her teeth and it seems to make the axis of her maxilla come loose; James watches her molars clatter.

"Okay," he sighs. "Guess that's a yes. I'm just gonna put it down on the floor here, and we can chat for a bit, and then

you can see if you want it, okay? No time pressure. I've got all day." It's not a lie.

She glares at him. As James tries to put the plate down, he must stray a little too close, because she snarls and thrashes her legs out across the floor at him, frothing at the mouth.

"Oh, piss off," James says. He lets the plate hit the floor, resting it there. "How you kept going to classes at Hogwarts and nobody noticed you're fucking possessed, I don't know."

Her pale eyes flash with something James doesn't recognise. Anger, maybe. She stills, the back of her throat rippling with a low growl that is almost a gargle.

"People notice shit easily at Hogwarts," James sighs. "Me and my friends had to spend a whole month not talking in third year. Mandrake leaves for the, uh, potion. Remus told McGonagall that we were doing, uh, an elective strike from speaking in protest for house elf rights. Which I think Pads liked. His little brother's all about that house elf shit. But yeah, people all noticed and knew about it and rumours flew all month. I think McGonagall suspected us, but she probably couldn't prove anything."

Amelie doesn't move. She just watches him. It's creepy as hell; she's got this penetrative stare like if you move too quickly, she'll lunge at you and bite your head off.

"We got through the whole month on our first try, though," James says. "It was a close one, though. And Peter and I almost got our leaves mixed up once we'd bottled them. Being able to speak again was like being able to breathe. Didn't realise how much I'd missed it 'til I could do it again."

Out in the hallway, somebody trips over something. Remus curses quietly. James wants to go out there and check on him just for an excuse not to be in here, drowning under Amelie's stare.

She twitches at the sound, rearing her neck back so the bones stick out of the front of it. There's a tear down the side of her white shirt. James watches her ribs skittering under her skin.

"We don't know what to do with you, you know," he sighs. "The Order's pissed at us. They know we went to Hogwarts. They already don't trust me, I know it. And if we tell them you're here, they'll trust us less. Kidnapping a fourth year. Won't matter that you're mad as a fucking March hare. And if I don't have the Order when Remus and Lily leave, I won't have anyone. Nobody's looking for Sirius anymore, anyway, except you-know-who. And me."

Amelie goes very still. James watches her and she watches him right back. She doesn't even blink.

"You know him, don't you?" James asks. He shuffles forwards and she still doesn't move. "Sirius." And she blinks so he says it again. "Sirius."

Amelie grunts. James shuffles closer still, breath catching in the top of his throat.

"Whatever he gave you," he murmurs. "Whatever he did. You can tell me. You can tell us. We won't hurt you."

She blinks at him again. For a moment, James thinks, she looks startlingly human. Like a real person.

James moves closer again, until he's close enough that she can kick him. "You can have the stew," he says, fishing

around in his pocket and pulling out the packet of gummies. "And these. If you just... let me know you understand me."

Her eyes slide, almost languid, from James to the Haribos. There's no recognition in them, not like there was when James said Sirius' name. Like she's retreated back inside herself for good. But for a moment there, he could have sworn...

"Please?" James asks, just to ask. He moves closer still, until he can reach out and touch the bedframe beside her tied wrists. "I'll untie you. We can try to talk. I just need to know you won't attack me." He swallows hard. "I know you're still in there. Sirius used to get weird and closed off. Not-- not like you. But one time I saw him go inside of himself like that. I didn't see stuff like that a lot. Guess I didn't want to."

Again, at Sirius' name, Amelie's eyes flash with consciousness. As if, for a moment, something has overtaken her.

James reaches out a trembling hand and rests it on her shoulder, over her torn Slytherin robes, which stink still, all dark and heavy with crusted gunk. He squeezes gently, firmly, and tries to will some humanity into her.

"Please," he murmurs again. "Just tell me what the fourth was."

Lily almost died for this. Remus hates him for this. James has a red anger stewing in his gut that's been there since the summer of '75. It thickens every time he breathes. But his hope is bright and hard as pyrite; he won't let it go, he'll keep it knotted between his teeth until it tears them from his gums.

Sound behind him, like a gunshot in the quiet. Like the dissolve of a funeral crowd. The handle creaks and there's the rush of the bottom of the door opening against the carpet.

"James?" Remus' voice asks behind him.

Amelie lashes her head around; her hungry jaw cracks and she bites his arm, hard, right around the wrist. Pain lashes down the tendon. James yells out and yanks his arm away; her teeth rip strips into his skin, blood gushing to the surface like lines of red paint.

Remus' arms sling around his neck and pull James away from her, and they both topple back onto the floor, skidding away as she gnashes bloody teeth, spitting out a hunk of torn skin.

"Shit!" James shouts. "My arm!"

Remus crowds around his side, peering down at the wound. "She didn't catch a vein."

James chances a glance at it. The skin is drawn up in folds around the fleshy tears through his brown skin, like how fabric knots up when you pull on a thread. It's a sickening mess, but not like the nausea is.

"What were you doing?" Remus demands. "She bit Lily, too--"

"She recognised his name," James pants. He reaches up his bloody hand to grab the front of Remus' shirt. "Sirius' name. She recognised him."

Remus' eyes blow wide. "She... she did?"

"I don't know why," James rushes out. "I just know that she did."

"Shit."

"I know. I was asking her about the fourth. What it is."

Remus runs a hand over his face. "You still shouldn't have gotten that close."

"I know that now."

"Then why did you?"

James shrugs. He presses his bleeding wrist to the top of his leg. "Fuck. We've still got bandages left, right?"

Remus sighs. "We're talking about this later," he says, as much a threat as it is a promise. He pulls James up. "That needs disinfecting. Come on."

"She hasn't eaten," James says.

"We can get Lily to feed her. Come on." Remus pulls him out of the room. James gets one last look over his shoulder at Amelie, who snarls at him, and then Remus has closed the door behind them, the runes unsettling on the floor, as if they, too, fear what's inside.

Pads,

Birthday soon, huh? Gets closer every day -- that's a stupid thing to say. Course it does. We're running out of time. Remus is getting antsy. He's packed all his stuff into one bag and it sits against the wall in the bedroom and stares at me in my sleep.

There's some things I don't talk about much in these. Don't know why. I guess maybe there's a bit of me that clings still to the cult of monogamy. Remus is sitting on the other side of the kitchen table reading 'Das Kapital' (it's about communism; do you know what that is?) and we kissed just now. I don't imagine that he's you, but sometimes I worry he thinks I do. We talked about it once. Before Christmas. Things were less complicated then, if you could call them that; they were still complicated, I think he still felt the way I know he feels now, and I still didn't notice, because I've realised lately that I never notice anything that's important.

What am I saying? I don't know. I read a letter I wrote to you in late '75 the other day. I was still talking about Lily like that was going to happen then. Remus told me once that you'd been jealous of her. Is that true? If you were, you never showed it. Or maybe I just didn't see it. Or maybe you and Remus were better liars than I thought you were. I don't know. Lily can stand being in the same room as me (most of the time; sometimes it seems hard, I don't blame her), but I think the bit of me that thought I'd like to see her lips up close is still at Hogwarts. In that fucking common room. Jesus Christ.

I think it's this: I'm worried we're all going to leave and go our separate ways and then I'm going to realise I can't get them back. I've been looking at Remus and seeing you lately, you know that, Sirius? It's been harder to pull you both apart. It was always sort of hard, and now I know why, and I've only just figured it out and he's leaving. And you left. And I'll still be in the same place as I ever was. Fuck!

Yours,

Prongs.

"Come on," Lily tells him. "Haircut time."

James glances up from the pile of letters he's working through. They've had an influx from Hogwarts in the past few weeks, mostly Gryffindors. Curious and hurt and angry. *You were here*, most of them seem to say. *And now we still are*.

Lily snips the scissors in her hand open and shut, gesturing to the bathroom. "Since we'll be moving out soon. Thought we should tidy ourselves up one last time."

"Okay," James agrees, and rubs his eyes. "Can you do Remus first? He's grown a mullet recently. It looks terrible."

"You don't need to tell me that," Lily snorts. "I need to redo Dorcas' shave first, and Mary wants a trim. Come in in a bit, okay? I'll call you."

James gives her a thumbs up. "I'll keep working."

"Yes, you will." She wanders back out of the kitchen.

Remus, sitting in the window with a cup of tea in his lap, coughs. "I'm still awake, you know."

"It's the truth. It doesn't suit you."

"I quite like it," Remus admits. "I've been thinking of growing it out."

"Don't," James advises. "It suits you short. How you had it in fourth year. When it fell over your eyes."

"My fringe looked terrible. Mum did it."

"It was adorable," James waves him off, and then realises he's probably overstepped a bit. "I thought so, anyway."

Remus exhales. "He said it was ridiculous-looking," he says morosely, and takes another sip of his tea.

James goes back to his work. He gets up halfway through the next letter to grab a sneakoscope from the drawer, but the second he opens it, they all begin to scream again, as they have been since the end of February.

"Shit!" he says, and throws the drawer closed. Inside, they continue to rattle.

"Huh," Remus puts in, not looking up.

They don't speak again until Lily comes to call them for haircuts. Remus and James file out to the bathroom in her wake, passing Dorcas in the hallway, who grins at them, her dark head shining under the light. The bathroom floor is covered in the dust of shorn black hair.

"You first," Lily instructs Remus.

Remus sighs and clambers up to sit on the countertop, bare feet in the sink. Lily sits side-saddle behind him and James sits on the closed toilet seat, watching her drape a towel over Remus' narrow shoulders.

"I still think it looks better longer," Remus grumbles, seeming not to mean it. "But go ahead."

Lily pulls a fine-toothed comb through his mousey locks. James watches them both, detailing the curves of their backs and the outlines of their tired faces. He does his best to commit them to memory and thinks he's done a terrible job of it. Outside, afternoon wanes, the sky going blue with

the oncoming evening. Somewhere in Lambeth, something is burning.

"It's a wonder none of us have gotten nits," Lily sighs, hand fluttering across the back of Remus' neck. "Nobody at Hogwarts ever got nits. Weird. With the dorms and everything."

"Bet they charmed the pillows," Remus says, and yawns, neck trembling with it. "They charmed them to clean themselves, too."

"My dad used to do that with ours, too," James puts in. "It's common in wizarding households."

"Well, sadly not in our wizarding household," Lily snorts. "Or I'd have to spend less time cleaning the sheets."

"I do them sometimes," Remus protests.

Lily nudges his head forward with the pad of her knuckle. "Stay like that. And yeah, sometimes, but it's mostly me."

"I did them once," James protests. "I just always forget how to use the washing machine."

"And the dishwasher," Remus says.

"And the dryer," Lily adds.

"I'm doing my best!" James defends, half-laughing, and rests his elbow his knee, putting his chin in his hand. "You should make it really short at the back, Lily. Like, so it doesn't grow out like that again."

"I'm not getting an undercut," Remus says immediately, alarmed.

James chortles. "It would look good on you!"

"Like hell. Just... make it presentable, please," Remus requests.

"Presentable. Right." Lily laughs and then laughs a bit more. She puts her scissors down and rests her forehead against the tawny hair on the back of Remus' hair, shaking with mirth. "Presentable," she says again, like it's hilarious.

"What?" Remus asks.

She shakes her head, laughing still. "Look at the three of us. When, in all the time we've been doing this shit, have we been presentable?"

James takes them in, sitting in this grimy bathroom and close enough that their heat has begun to mist the windows; Lily with her dark hair short enough that it doesn't touch her shoulders, Remus with his overlong limbs and acne, James with nothing left to lose in the world.

"Yeah," he says, and snorts himself. "I like to think my hair's better now, though."

"That's because you spend less time," Remus laughs, "running your hand through it like a boy racer."

"Shut up!" James gasps, feigning outrage.

"He's right," Lily snorts, shaking her head back and forth against the back of Remus' throat. "You did used to do that. I'd forgotten you did that."

"It was a nervous tick," he lies.

"Because you were such a nervous person."

“Whenever you were around, yeah.”

Remus hacks and chokes on his laugh, thumping at his bony chest with a fist. “You made such an idiot of yourself back then. Surprised we all stuck around you.”

“I’ve grown out of it,” James defends. “I... I’ve...” He trails off.

Lily grabs the other towel and smacks his knee with it. “Of course you have,” she says. “Your hair looks better when you don’t mess with it, you know.”

“Oh, shut it. You’ll make me blush.”

“I mean it! You’re not half bad looking when you don’t try to look like a Quidditch star. Not on Sirius’ level, but you’re alright.”

“And I,” Remus sighs. “Am famously ugly as sin.”

“Hey,” James says reasonably. “I don’t think your nose is that bad.”

Remus sticks a foot out of the sink to kick at him. “Shut it, you git.” He loses his balance and starts to topple off, and Lily grabs him, both of them laughing, James laughing too.

“You all look perfectly normal,” Lily says, when they’ve righted themselves. She goes back to hacking at the choppy edges of Remus’ hair. Bits of light brown fuzz litter the tiled floor. James sort of wants to pick them up and keep them.

“From a distance,” James agrees. “Up close, I bet we look pretty unsavoury. Moony’s scars, my casual arrogance. And I wouldn’t want to be caught in a dark alley with you, Lils, you’d probably win that fight.”

"I don't look tough," Lily snorts, brushing a lock of hair off the sleeve of her cardigan. "I look like a girl next door. Like your cousin's date to the family reunion."

"You look like you'd put me in the ground if I looked at Mary the wrong way," Remus replies.

"Yeah," James agrees. "Fair but tough."

Lily snorts. "I like that."

Once Remus' hair is done, James takes his place with his feet in the limescale-filled sink, and lets Lily clean up the overlong mess growing ratty at the back of his neck. She softens the sides and lops a whole inch off the top and it leaves James' hair less weighed-down than it was before. When he catches himself in the mirror, he looks two years younger for it, and it startles him. It sticks out at the back like it used to. He looks less like Sirius, he realises. He hadn't really noticed himself starting to look like him in the first place.

"You like it?" Lily asks.

James peers at himself, tilting his head left and right. "I... yeah, I suppose. Good job. Thanks."

Lily watches him. "Well," she says. "I'm glad you think it suits. I have to Hoover in here..."

"I'll do it," Remus offers, sitting on the toilet seat. He brushes his newly-cut curls out of his eyes. "James can sweep it out of the corners."

"I've agreed to nothing," James puts in.

Remus kicks him gently. "Please?"

“Of course.”

Lily sighs at them both. “I’m going to feed Amelie,” she says, and steps out, pocketing her scissors and comb. James watches her rub the heel of her palm through the back of hair as she goes. She seems oddly disquieted. Outside, it has gotten a little darker.

Remus and James drag out the Henry Hoover and a dustpan and brush and start on the bathroom floor. James cleans out the sink and unclogs the dark hair from the drain, and sweeps all the soft hairs off the side of the countertop, and Remus winds around him, jabbing Henry’s extendable pipe into all the corners to clear the dust. They don’t speak, working in silence but for the sound of the hoover.

James finishes and flushes the contents of the dustpan into the toilet. Then he sits up on the counter, brushing his hands off on his trousers. “Job well done?”

“What?” Remus asks, and turns the hoover off.

“Job well done,” James repeats.

“Oh. Yeah, I suppose.” Remus kicks the hoover out of the room in nudges. It squeaks over the threshold of the door and hits the opposite wall.

James clears his throat, perhaps to clear the silence. “It looks good on you. The hair.”

“I don’t like it. I feel naked.”

“You’ll get used to it.”

Remus runs a hand over the back of his head and then laughs. "Look at us," he says. "Marital problems at seventeen."

"I'm still sixteen," James caveats.

"And you were always the more ridiculous one of us." Remus sits back down on the toilet seat, staring at James' feet, which he wiggles back and forth in a little dance for Moony's entertainment.

"Guess I was," he admits. "But it was a close game."

"Sirius would kill me if he could see us right now."

"Don't say that. Makes it sound like he's dead."

"It's true," Remus protests. "For how long we spent..." He seems to stop himself.

"You can say it," James murmurs.

"For how long we spent wanting something we couldn't have." Remus sighs. "And I'm throwing it away."

James' heart leaps. "We can renew the lease. It's not too late to change your mind."

Remus raises a hand. "I... that's not it," he says. "It's... I don't know."

"You don't know if you want to do this?"

"I don't know if I'm doing this for the right reasons."

James shakes his head, sort of desperately. "Of course you're not. You're doing it because of him. It's all because of him. Everything. Every single thing."

"Maybe," Remus says stallingly. "I don't think it's... I don't think you get it."

"Then tell me."

"I don't want to argue with you. Please can we not argue."

"We don't have to." James spells forwards, right off the side of the counter. He finds himself half on his knees and half on Remus. Their faces are close and not close enough. "We don't have to argue. I just want to understand it."

"You can be so awful sometimes."

"I know. I know that."

Remus rubs his fingers into his eyes, so hard they whiten. "I can't spend the rest of my life being one jealous thing and then another. Of you, and of him, and of Lily. And this war is going to kill me."

"I won't let it."

"It won't listen to you," Remus laughs wetly. He lowers his hands and puts them on either side of James' neck, thumbs rubbing the bottoms of his cheeks. "James, it's going to kill me, and it's going to kill him. And I can't be the reason you grieve. And I can't be the thing you replace him with."

"You're not!" James says desperately.

"I know I'm not," Remus replies, and James knows he doesn't believe him.

"I just want--" And he stalls. He wants. He wants. He wants. All he ever does is want. "I want you to keep caring."

Remus sobs, then, in a rush. It seems to force himself out of him, half-dry. "Of course I'll keep caring. I couldn't stop. Not if I wanted to."

"And do you want to?"

"I want a lot of things."

James rubs his face. He tries to take one of Remus' hands but they're gone too quickly and the hot point of contact between them has died like a bad connection.

"You said you'd follow me anywhere," he says, half-accusatory. "You said you'd follow me."

Remus kisses him, desperate and hungry, like he wants something from it; James kisses back; he can't think to do anything else. When they separate, Remus' hair tickles his forehead, and James thinks he should have saved some of those brown locks, but they're all in the belly of the Hoover now.

"I know," Remus murmurs. "But it wasn't true. And I'm sorry for that."

"Sorry doesn't do anything. I don't care that you're sorry." James shakes his head back and forth and back and forth. "I don't care about that."

"Then understand that I don't have a choice."

"You do. And you've made it."

"Things can't last forever."

"We could."

Remus draws in a long breath and lets it out. "More than a year ago now," he sighs. "You told me it wasn't the same without him. And I stayed. And you told him you'd go anywhere with him, at the Rosier Manor. And I stayed. And he sent a letter and didn't even sign it. And I stayed. And you tamed the wolf until you couldn't anymore. And I stayed."

"And you can stay longer."

"Not at the expense of my home. Not at the expense of people like me." Remus looks at James, then, properly looks at him. "Not at my own expense, either. When you find him..."

"If."

Remus shakes his head. "Even if it's his body, you'll be the one to find it. And when you find him, you and him, it'll be the way it was meant to be. And maybe I can come back but I probably won't and that'll be okay. This is a war. Loving too much makes you vulnerable."

"You think that's bullshit."

"I think it's true."

James grabs him and shakes him. "If you have to rationalise yourself into a million reasons for leaving, maybe that's because you should be staying, Remus--"

Remus stands up. He looks down at James, an odd expression on his face that James has never seen on it before. "Give me a good reason to stay."

"For me."

“We’re not thirteen anymore.”

“For him.” James is getting desperate now; he can hear the tension of it in his own voice.

Remus laughs. He rubs his face. He sits down and stands back up again, and kicks the sink, and kicks the dustpan against the wall, and walks out without another word.

Moody,

Since it’s only a few more days until I move in at HQ, I wanted to ask; I’ll be allowed on actual missions, right? I know we broke house arrest, but I’ll be of-age on Tuesday, and I want in on the fighting. I’ll still be managing the delivery service, but I want Mary and Dorcas to help with that, and neither of them is in the right shape to fight, not with what they’ve been through.

What’s the plan to move Amelie, too? You told me someone without the Trace on them would come by to apparate her to a safe location. When? It’s hard to keep restraining her, she’s not eating. And she bites.

Anyway. Remus sends his regards; he’s taking the train back to Wales on Wednesday. Lily’s going with one of the Friends to rendezvous with their allies in Rostock (the muggleborn sanctuary people, you know them?) that night, too, so the apartment will be empty then. We don’t have much stuff to move out. Couple of trips back and forth to HQ should do us fine. We don’t own much.

Get back to me soon about my first question please? I’m pretty sure I’ve already proven myself.

Cheers,

JP.

James pretends to sleep in on the morning of his birthday.

He's not sure why he does it; maybe because he expects Remus and Lily to give him the same treatment as they gave Remus for his. He knows that's silly. It was a disaster on the tenth and it'll be a disaster on the twenty-seventh. There's no difference.

But still, he waits for Lily and Remus to get up, padding out of the room with a quiet that feels forced, and then writes a quick letter to Sirius. Most of it slips out of him without James really feeling it; he tells Sirius to keep safe, makes some joke about getting old, offers a false platitude about today being a good day. He's not sure when he chose to start lying so much in his letters. Maybe a while ago. Probably a while ago.

When James finally deems it appropriate to wander into the kitchen, it's past nine in the morning. Lily has put up the blue bunting again, the stuff from Remus' birthday, and they've got a plate of going-cold pancakes in the middle of the table and a jar of jam sitting beside it.

"Happy birthday," Lily greets, with a small grin.

"Penblwydd hapus," Remus offers. He smiles, too.

"Pen-blood hapuss," James says halfheartedly. He sits down at the head of the table. "You didn't have to do this, you know."

"Course we did. Little celebration. Right?" Dorcas slaps a gift in front of James, soft and swaddled in brown paper. "Open it."

"Pancakes first?"

"They've been sitting there for an hour," Lily sighs. "They can't get any colder than they are."

"Fair enough," James mutters, and tears open Dorcas' present; it's a muggle t-shirt with Bowie's face on it.

"Didn't know if you liked him," Dorcas says cheerily. "Black did, so..."

"I'm not a fan," James grimaces. "You want it, Remus?"

"Keep it," Remus tells him. "Give it to Sirius when you see him."

James folds the t-shirt gently, with a swell of affection and something else, and puts it back into its nest of brown paper. "Thanks, Dorcas."

She shakes her head. "Thank *you*. Just... thanks."

"I got you something too," Mary speaks up. She hands James her gift, which isn't wrapped; it's a black spiral notebook with a design of a dragon embossed in gold on the front. "I see you writing all the time, so..."

James' heart swells. "It's pretty," he says, for lack of anything else. "Thank you."

"And mine," Lily offers. She hands him a vessel of brown paper; there's a muggle book inside. *The Outsiders* the front reads, the words slashed over a paper cover of black, red and white. "I enjoyed it. Thought you would, too."

"I probably won't read it," James tells her.

"I know. Keep it on a shelf and think of me."

"You know I always think of you anyway."

She scrunches up her nose at him. "Open Remus'."

James looks at Remus, a bit surprised. "I didn't think you'd get me anything," he says.

Remus smiles tightly. He pushes a brown paper package at James, smaller than all the others. When James opens it, it's a scarf, hand-knitted, quite thick and very long. Red like a nightmare.

"He crocheted it himself," Lily says. "Took ages. I had to teach him."

"Oh," James says. "Remus..."

Remus waves him off. "I wanted to make something," he says. "You know. Something that's... I don't know. I just wanted to. Take it with you? When you move in with the Order."

"Of course," James says, with all the sincerity he can muster. "Of course I will."

They spend the day mostly miserable, all of them. James eats most of the pancakes and they spend the morning in mild festivities, but by the time the afternoon comes, everyone's scattered off to do their own thing. Dorcas and Mary are packing to move tomorrow, Lily is sorting the last of the letters in the apartment, Remus is sleeping, still exhausted after Sunday's moon, and James is tasked with feeding Amelie, who has still not said a word of English to any of them, and spends most of her time catatonic or screaming.

James plates up a slice of birthday cake and brings it to the second bedroom. Amelie is already awake when he steps inside, and she bears barking teeth at him.

“Not a fan of Victoria sponge? Me neither,” James tells her conversationally, kicking the door closed behind him. “But don’t tell the others I said so. This is the expensive brand. I think Remus worked an extra shift in advance to afford this.”

Amelie glares daggers at him. She doesn’t move away from or towards the door, just watches, a snap on her lips.

“They’re lovely to me, I know.” Very carefully, James rests a fork and a butter knife on the floor beside the plate, just within Amelie’s reach. “Those are gonna stay there ‘til I know you won’t try to stab me with them, okay? You can grab them if you want. But I’d like if you didn’t. We’re trying to build some trust here.”

“Nng,” she says.

“That was a sound!” James cheers. “Congrats!”

She glowers.

“Remus got me this.” James tugs on the scarf around his neck, which he hasn’t taken off since breakfast, even though it’s far too warm to reasonably wear it inside. “Well, he made it for me. Isn’t that great? He just sat down and just... made it. Must’ve taken ages. Guess he did it while I was out doing deliveries. He’s not good with his hands; he broke his left knuckle, the one right on the end of his hand, during a moon when he was a kid and it never healed right. But he did it anyway.”

As he's talking, James lies down on the floor near the door, the carpet scratchy beneath him. He makes a point of not looking at Amelie.

"He's selfless like that, you know? Always doing stuff for other people. Never himself. Don't know how he got into that habit. Maybe it was us. We're demanding, Sirius and I."

Amelie shifts where she's sitting. One of her fingers balls in and out of a fist against the ropes, making a soft scratching sound.

"Yeah, I know. Real shitheads, the both of us." James rolls his head around to look at her, and she stares right back. "Never knew what we had. I've got a habit of doing that."

Slowly, rhythmically, Amelie begins dropping her heel against the floor. They had to take her shoes off her last week after she kicked Remus in the ribs so hard she cracked one, and her bare feet are blistered where she's been rubbing them on the floor.

James watches her for a while. Her teeth rescind into her mouth and she looks thoughtful, almost. For the first time in all these weeks, her lips fall down over her fangs like a blanket.

And then James gets it.

"You want the diary, don't you?" he asks.

Amelie's face shoots to look at him so quickly it cricks her neck with an audible noise. Her hand, scrabbling her cracked nails against the rope, speeds up to scratch the twain frantically. Her pale, bloated features seem to swim on her face.

“The diary,” James repeats. “You want it.”

She begins to strain against the bindings. Her teeth gnash in her mouth. Her dull, furious gaze stabs into James. Every inch of it is rage.

James stands up and runs out, right into the hallway and then the bedroom, which is empty. Frantically, he begins to tear through all of his things, already packed into a shoulder bag; books, a pen knife, the baseball bat, hundreds of letters, so many that James begins throwing them onto the bed in his haste. *Diary. Diary. Diary.*

“Fuck!” he says, when he realises it isn’t in there. A letter snares on his sleeve, the envelope not fully stuck down, and he tosses it against the wall.

The frenzy of it has taken him now -- James runs out of the room and down the hallway to the kitchen, throwing the door open and barrelling inside.

“Diary!” he yells.

Lily, Remus, Dorcas and Mary all look up, congregated here now. Remus still looks half-asleep, Mary has clearly been crying. None of them look in the mood.

“What?” Lily asks flatly.

“The diary!” James repeats. “It’s-- I need--” He catches himself against the wall and draws a deep breath. “She wants the diary.”

Lily squints at him. “I don’t think giving her what she wants is a good idea,” she starts.

But Remus cuts over her. "She already... I already figured that out." He flushes a bit. "Last night. I figured out that she wanted it. I put it in there with her."

James stares. "But she... huh. That doesn't... why didn't you tell us?"

Remus shrugs. "Figured it wouldn't matter. It's an empty book."

But James has a very bad feeling. "I'm gonna go see if it's still in there with her," he says. "Make sure she hasn't eaten it."

"It's on the bed behind her!" Remus calls after him.

James stalks back down the hallway, and the linen-linked runes lined up under the door catch his eye as he approaches. They're all a bit out of order, fluttering in an unseen breeze.

Breeze. Draught. James feels wind on his face. *The knife*, he remembers.

"Is there a window open?" Mary calls from the kitchen, sounding very far away.

James rushes to the door and flings it all the way open, staring. He lets out a shout -- perhaps a curse, perhaps Remus' name.

Inside, the bed is empty, the ropes are cut, and the butter knife is lying by the bedpost. And the window has been flung wide open.

Amelie is nowhere to be seen.

Back in the kitchen, for the first time in weeks, the sneakoscopes go quiet.

Chapter End Notes

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I WILL FIND MY WAY BACK TO YOU

Chapter Notes

phew. okay. lots to say here.

first of all, translations for this chapter, if anyone's interested in some of the major ones (SPOILERS AHEAD, READ THE CHAPTER FIRST):

- the mug says 'KILL THE RABBIT'
- sirius' ukrainian book on horcruxes is titled 'to flee death' (ha)
- the boat he and galina get on is, in icelandic, called 'the red stag'
- when he and galina talk in the train station, galina has said to him, 'that's life when the skirt is striped', which is a swedish idiom that basically means, 'such is life'. sirius responds, 'when you're as stupid as a suitcase without a handle, you must be one hell of a useless person, right?', which is a rare but very colourful French insult for stupid people. He probably learned it from a vulgar French relative.

second of all: trigger warnings for the usual. violence, trauma, unhealthy relationship dynamics, blood, injury. lots of stuff.

thirdly: there will be a break after this chapter! a pretty notable one! a week or two, maybe closer to three depending on how my chronic illness stuff goes, which isnt lots, but it's a lot for me. if you want the next one quicker, drop me a comment, they make me go insane and write faster.

fourth: this chapter means a lot to me, and ive been working towards it for a while. it's not perfect, but i sincerely hope you enjoy it. thank you to tumblr user clari illiterategf my beloved for helping w/ this chapter. you're a gem and im so lucky to know u! also, thanks to my buds rayla and shayna and jass and penny and all the rest of you for being like, the nicest ppl on the planet. i love u. ur the coolest best motivation ever.

recommended listening: 'salt and the sea' off iii by the lumineers. big oof. remember go follow me on tumblr for fun hijinks xx

enjoy! see you soon.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Amazing what a few months alone can do. Sirius has spent most of his teenage years sure he won't go mad until he's an adult, but nothing has ever felt quite as mad as this; it is June, Rosier's cellar is dark with tacky, dry air, and Sirius has reached a hand out to grab onto the sleeve of Riddle's robes.

Tom turns to look at him. He's standing and Sirius is crumpled, broken legs all a tangle around him.

Like he's been burnt, Sirius lets go.

"Leave," he says, and tries to mean it.

Silence stretches. When Sirius looks up next, Tom is staring down at him, a strange, curious expression on his face.

"Leave," Sirius says again. "You've said what you need to say. Just go."

Riddle crouches down, eye-level with him again. His yellow eyes pierce Sirius. "It's been a year, you know."

"I'm perfectly fucking aware."

"It'll be a year more if you don't hold your tongue."

"It'll be a year more no matter what I do with my tongue."

"If you keep using it, I'll cut it out."

"And regrow it just to cut it out again," Sirius snaps. "Your threats don't scare me anymore. Threats aren't as scary when I know you'll make good on 'em. More like warnings."

Riddle cocks his head to the side an inch. "You grabbed onto my arm," he says softly.

"You've got a bloodstain on your robe." Sirius shifts a little, maybe to get away, and jars something in his snapped femur. "Ah, fuck. Fucking heal me already, please."

Laughing, Tom waves his right hand and Sirius' legs put themselves back together again. Power jumps across the tips of his fingers, dangling there like a prize.

"No," he says, crouching lower, until their faces are close. "No, that's not it."

"Well," Sirius snaps. "Let someone put you in a fuckin' basement for a year on their own. See if you get a little desperate for a conversation."

Riddle laughs, like it's funny. "Desperate? What a word."

"You could've put someone else in the fucking cell."

Tom eyes him. "We both know we couldn't have done that."

"I wouldn't have told them. I'm not letting anybody die for me."

"Maybe there's nothing you can do about that."

Sirius watches him. "You've been planning something," he says. "I heard them talking in the wine cellar. There's a wedding."

Tom raises a grey finger. "I'll let them know to reinforce the silencing runes."

"Fuck you. Seriously. Go fuck yourself. I hope you die."

"I'll cut it out."

"Do it. See if I care."

Movement, quick. Tom puts a hand around Sirius' chin and squeezes. Sirius feels his eyes flutter closed.

And just like that, Tom drops him, standing up. "After the wedding," he says casually. "I'll come see you again. And if you've not changed your mind by then, you might when you hear the news."

"The news?"

"Things are going to change soon."

"Things are always getting worse with you around."

Riddle peers down at him. "One of my many talents." His eyes widen a bit and he looks mad. Pure fucking mad. "I'll see you soon."

"What are you going to do?" Sirius thinks of James; his lungs feels like they're shrivelling. "What are you going to

do, Tom?"

Tom steps back, into the doorway. Every time Sirius sees him, he looks less like a person and more like a weapon.

"I'm going to change things," he says simply. "Things are going to change."

Someone puts something down on the table in front of Sirius; he jolts awake with a start, sitting upright. "Nap," he says. "It was just a nap."

Yí'ān rolls his eyes at him. "Tea," he replies, gesturing to the mug. "It's just tea."

Sirius rubs his knuckles into his eyes. "What's the time?"

"Just past two."

"Shit. Did I miss anything?"

"Not that I can see." Yí'ān takes a seat beside him at the comms desk. "Not that you were paying a whole lot of attention to begin with, old chap."

Sirius flushes a bit. He closes the book he'd been sleeping on and hopes he didn't drool on it. "Gift from Galina," he says. "From the last time we went to Khmelnytskyi."

"I know that. I do have eyes, you know."

"Didn't know they worked very well."

Yí'ān elbows him and reaches over to take a sip of Sirius' tea. "We're sharing this, for that."

"I can go make my own."

"We're out of milk."

"I can take it black."

"Ha."

"Pun not intended."

"Of course."

Yí'ān takes another sip, then passes the mug to Sirius. It's got a painting of a rabbit on the side, with the words 'DREP KANINEN' bashed across the side.

"What does that say?" Sirius asks.

Yí'ān shrugs. "Dunno. Don't ask me to read Norwegian, it'll give me flashbacks. I get cranky when I'm traumatised. As do you."

"I'm not that bad."

Yí'ān seems like he wants to mention the nightmare and decides against it. "April soon," he says instead. "Spring is springing. Takes a bit longer to arrive up here. I remember a lot about spring in Scotland, actually."

"Yeah?"

"We had daffodils a lot where I lived. The Welsh flower. Always bloomed around St. Davids."

"Dewi Sant," Sirius says. "I've got a friend at home who's from, uh, near Swansea, I think. Told me that's what it is in Welsh. He speaks it really well."

"Oh." Yí'ān eyes him. "Friend?"

Sirius elbows him right back and finishes the tea, draining it even though it's scalding. It was James' birthday today (yesterday, he supposes, since it's morning now). He didn't do anything to celebrate it and feels a little bad.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Yí'ān asks, and Sirius knows he doesn't mean Remus.

"We're, uh," he says. "We're."

"You don't have to say it in words," Yí'ān offers mildly. "Galina's already told me you're going tomorrow."

"Right." Sirius lets out the breath he's been holding. "Good. Are you okay with it?"

"I think it's a stupid idea, if that's what you're asking," Yí'ān tells him. "I think it's stupid, and I told Galina that, and she doesn't agree with me, so. I'm not going to make you take sides, but I think it's bloody ridiculous to go back there now."

Sirius holds up the book, pushing it at Yí'ān. "All of the research we've done," he says. "We can destroy them. If we do this right."

"And if now isn't the time?"

"The longer we leave him, the longer he has to hide them from me. And Galina thinks he'll try to make more."

"Do you think that?"

"No," Sirius admits. "He... he's got seven. That's all he wanted to make. I don't think he'll make more. Galina

reckons he might, though. She thinks he'll go as far as he has to."

"Well, you know him best."

That stings. "I'm going to do it," Sirius says, with what he hopes is finality. "I don't think I've got a choice. Claude thinks I should, too."

"Claude's only still alive because of sheer dumb luck, for all the stupid shit they do."

"Then maybe I've got some luck on my side, too."

"You're bad luck. You told me that."

"I told her that."

Yí'ān shrugs. "She tells me everything. Don't know what I'll do while you two are gone."

"You'll be fine," Sirius dismisses. "We might not even be gone long. As soon as we've got it, we're coming back."

"Which one?"

"The only one I think we can get to without him knowing," Sirius says. He hugs the book — *Втеча від смерті*, the cover says — tight to his chest. "We might be back the day after tomorrow, if it all goes well."

"And do you think it'll all go well?"

"I think we'll do our best."

"You're taking a boat down?"

"I asked Galina to," Sirius says. "Just feels fitting. More than apparating does."

"Well." Yí'ān reaches over to squeeze his shoulder. "Take this." And he fishes in his pocket and pulls out two notebooks, handing Sirius one.

Sirius stares. He feels himself tense. "A diary?"

"Communications ledger. Write to me. It can't handle much ink, but it'll take a couple of words. If anything goes wrong. Okay? I'll bring Claude, I'll bring the bloody Queen of England, if I have to. It'll take me to you."

"Thought you were against the monarchy," Sirius says, almost laughing.

Yí'ān doesn't smile. "You promise you will?"

"Galina'll contact you. Right? You don't need me to do that."

Shaking his head, Yí'ān pushes the notebook into Sirius' hands, closing his fingers around it with his own. "Just take it," he says. "And remember it."

"It was her, wasn't it?" Sirius asks, then. "It was her that told me I was going to change the world. When I woke up after... after the ritual. I remember someone saying that to me. I think of it a lot."

Yí'ān hesitates. "It was me, actually," he says after a bit.

"Oh. I didn't think so."

He shrugs, seeming to struggle. "Between you and I, I don't think changing the world is entirely Galina's speed. Not in the way it's mine. Or... or not in the way it used to be."

"Then what do you think she wants?" Sirius asks.

"More than revolution?" Yí'ān peers at him. Then he shrugs and looks away, out of the dark window set into the top of the wall, through which the sky is light but for the brightness of city lights high above them.

Sirius chews on a hangnail. Slowly, he nods. "We'll be okay," he murmurs, when he thinks he should. "Honestly."

"I know that. I don't doubt either of you." Yí'ān chews his lip, looking like he's trying to find the right way to word what he wants to say. "I just worry that that arm—"

"—is going to kill you," Lily is saying, when James steps out of the bathroom. "He's going to kill you, and then me, and then James—"

"What are we talking about?" James asks.

"What do you think we're talking about?" Remus retorts, sitting on the twin bed in the centre of the room. He rubs his tired face. "It's too close to the moon for this."

"Moody," Lily says. She rounds on James. "He's sent five patroni now. Five! Thank Merlin muggles can't see them. Jesus Christ."

"Listen," James placates, leaning against the doorframe. "They can't find us here. And so long as Dorcas and Mary don't tell them too much, we'll be fine."

"Well I think that'll be easier said than done," Lily snaps. "Dropping them with the Order was a bad idea. We should've left them with the Friends."

"Thought you didn't like the Friends," James mutters, and shuffles over to lie on the bed beside Remus. "We can't stay here for more than a night. You didn't see how expensive that was. We're using up the last of our funds."

"Yeah, well, apologies for trying to find us a base, since you complained all night last night because you had to sleep on the train," Lily sighs. She rubs at her face. "We shouldn't fight."

"I could do with a fight," James says honestly. "Day after my birthday, and we're hunting down some crazy possessed girl, we're in Brighton, for Merlin's sake, I hate Brighton. Great bloody birthday present."

"Can you both stop?" Remus asks, muffled into his palms. "I've got a headache."

"Think we've all got a headache," James mutters, but drops it.

He doesn't say what they're all thinking; that their partnership has overstayed its welcome. It doesn't need saying. They're all thinking it anyway. Lily looks grey with stress and Remus looks close to tearing his hair out. James feels like a poorly made decision.

"Well, the muggle news said it was Brighton she's been spotted in," Lily says. "We just need to keep an ear out. Right? Missing kid, boarding school. Rich family. They'll be quick to report it if they see her again."

Remus turns up the burbling radio on the bedside table. Pale morning light filters through the thin, shitty blinds. "We'll find her," he says, not seeming to mean it.

"We have to," James grunts. "It's our only lead."

Lily and Remus exchange a furtive look that he pretends not to see.

“Come on,” Lily sighs. She beckons James with a hand. “Bathroom.”

“I’ve showered already.”

“I know that. Come on,” she says again. “There’s something I wanted to do last night, before, uh. The whole fiasco.”

Fiasco is a mild word for it. Reporting Amelie as missing (and the subsequent argument), dropping Dorcas and Mary with the Order (and the subsequent argument), and setting out to Brighton in the early morning when news reached them in the wee hours that she had been sighted on the train station platform (and the subsequent argument that followed them all the way from Paddington to their destination, and to this shitty BnB, which smells bad and costs enough to murder). James has never wanted to sleep so desperately.

Still, he pushes himself up and follows Lily to the bathroom.

“I’ll keep an eye on the radio myself, then,” Remus calls after them without heat.

Lily steps in behind James and closes the door. She goes to the window and fishes around in her bag of toiletries, and then pulls out the clippers she used to buzz the back of Remus’ hair, which sit dark in her palm.

She brandishes them at him. “You. Me. Shave.”

“You want to shave your head?”

Lily pushes the clippers on him. "I want you to shave my head."

"Oh," James says. "Okay. C'mon, sit on the toilet seat."

Dutifully, Lily sits down, facing the window. James kneels upright behind her and drapes one of the grubby brown handtowels over her shoulders. Then, he clicks the clippers on, and then off again. On, off. On, off.

"You're sure about this?" he asks.

Lily nods. "Yeah," she says. "I think so."

"Okay," James says. He clicks the guard in place. "Gonna leave you a few millimetres. Like, a crew-cut look."

"Whatever you want," Lily sighs tiredly. "Whatever you want."

James turns the clippers on again and sets them against the back of her neck, against the grain of her hair. Then, he shuffles them up through her red locks, which fall in clumps over his hand, catching on his sleeve, hitting the floor in a puddle.

Lily doesn't cry or anything. When James looks at her face in the mirror, she just looks resigned, as if this is something she has to do.

"I think I don't want to look like myself anymore," she tells James, when he's halfway done. "You know? I think that's it. I think I don't want to look like whoever it was that... that he was friends with. Sev— Snape."

"I can go shorter," James offers.

“Nah.” Lily sniffs. “This is fine.”

When James is finished, he shakes off the towel onto the floor and then wraps his arms around Lily’s neck from behind, resting his forehead on her shoulder. She brings one hand up to rest on his arm, rubbing small circles into the skin there.

“Can you do me next?” James asks.

Her hand pauses. “You love your hair.”

“It’ll grow back.” James thinks of Remus, and of Sirius, and of the real fucking mess they’ve made of everything.

“Please?”

Lily sighs. “If it’s what you want,” she says, peering over her shoulder at him. She raises a hand to touch his hair, fiddling with a bit of it that sticks out at the side. “You sure?”

James nods. “It’ll make me look tough.”

“You look like an overgrown weed.”

“Just how I like it,” he jokes. “Maybe we can get Remus in on the pact.”

Lily laughs, standing up so James can take her place. She swipes the clippers from his hands. “I think it’ll be just—”

“—ours,” Galina says, pointing. “This one. Come on.”

Sirius hikes his bag up on his shoulders and follows Galina down the docks. The metal walkway clangs beneath them; the grey morning sky is full of seagulls. It’s cold, even colder than usual. The black ocean is angry today, churning,

so clear of mist that it looks like it might go on forever, ending in a hard, dark line against the pale horizon.

Their ship is one of the mangier passenger boats on the commercial end of the bay, rusted red and orange with peeling paint along its side, which reads *Rauði sviðið*. Galina steps on first, with an air that she belongs there with her steady gait, and Sirius scrambles over the walkway after her.

"Come," she says. We'll stand by the stern. Best view."

"I thought the best view would be at the bow," Sirius replies, following her across the deck, as she hands their tickets over to a grey-haired operator. "Looking forwards."

"Iceland is beautiful from a distance this time of year," Galina contends. "We can see your bay from a ways out, on a clear day like this."

"You mean the one I almost destroyed a few times?"

"We're all always destroying our homes," Galina rebukes. She takes a spot standing at the stern with her arms crossed on the railing, looking out over the docks with the wind whipping her grey hair around in front of her face.

"Suppose we are." And Sirius stands beside her. He watches the boats as they rock on the water. "We met up there."

"I really was sure you'd kill yourself."

"I thought about it," Sirius admits. "A lot. But I promised James I wouldn't let the secret die with me. Hey." It occurs to him. "If I die now, you'll still know. Maybe it can go like

that. I'll die and you can give it to someone else. Then you can die too."

Galina laughs in the back of her throat. "Don't take that as an excuse to jump off the boat, now."

"Never. I wouldn't make you watch my pitiful attempts at swimming."

"Grew up in London," Sirius shrugs. "No water there, 'cept the Thames, but it's all full of used needles and shit down the stretch I lived near. You don't wanna swim in there. You'll get diseases. Or the rozzers after you."

"So, more diseases."

"Ha. I suppose." Sirius watches a couple embrace near the railing that overlooks the bay. His soul aches for something he can't name. "I don't want to go back. I really don't want to go back."

"I know."

"Can we go home?"

"If you want to," Galina says evenly. "But I get the sense—" She looks sidelong at him. "That you don't want to go back, either."

"I don't know what I want," Sirius admits. "I don't want."

Galina pats his arm, quite gently. "It's your last chance to get off the boat."

Sirius glances over his shoulder. The sailors are untying her — the other passengers, mostly other Icelanders with

drawn faces and raincoats, are dotted over the deck, sitting in chairs around the hull.

He considers running to jump for the docks — he could still make it, even as the boat pushes off with a groan — but then stops.

“Nah,” he sighs. “Nah. I have to do this.”

“I thought you’d say that.” Galina messes through his hair with her hand. “You should grow this out.”

“I’m planning on it.

“I’m proud of you.”

“Don’t say that.”

“Okay.” She takes her hand back. “Okay.”

Sirius watches the docks sink away, the pier getting further and further from them. As the boat glides through the churning, grey-brown waves, Reykjavik grows high before them both, seeming to stretch to consume the whole skyline. Sirius watches the suburbs, the bays, the small beach. He tries to peer through the buildings towards Galina and Yí’ān’s apartment. Tries to find it in the grey-black mess.

Yí’ān didn’t come to see them off. Sirius isn’t sure how he feels about that. The notebook feels like it’s burning a hole through his jacket.

“There it is,” Galina points. “Your bay.”

Sirius squints at it, making out the dark chasm of it, which looms wide like jaws along the cliffside down the way from

the city. "I won't miss it."

"You think you won't have to go back?"

"I'm getting better control of it, aren't I?"

Galina laughs. "You set fire to Yí'ān the other day."

"He was fine."

"He's always fine."

Sirius huffs a breath through his nose. "Don't make me doubt myself now," he says.

"Not planning on that." Galina watches Reykjavik intently; Sirius spends so long watching her that when he looks back at the city, it looks very far away, too far to swim, certainly. The water is calmer than it was when he first got here, and the port he arrived at then was further north. Colder.

"I'm scared," Sirius admits in a low voice. "I'm really scared."

Galina nods. "How's the arm?"

Sirius peers down at it. It's deadly cold and very still.

"Well," he says. "It's been better."

Galina lets out a belly laugh. "It's—"

"—been worse," the weather man garbles. "But we know one thing for sure; we should be seeing sunnier skies and warmer temperatures towards the end of the week. Back to you, Claire."

Remus turns the radio down as James and Lily walk in.
"Alright?"

And of course they've both shaved their heads. James, too; that bit's a surprise. Remus isn't sure if he likes it or hates it on him. It makes his face look harder and bonier, like he's been carved from something brittle.

James rubs a hand over his short hair, glimpsing himself in the reflection of the window. "Thoughts?"

"It doesn't suit you."

"Exactly what I was going for," James agrees.

Remus smiles tightly at him. He sort of wants to punch him, but he's wanted to since the raid on Hogwarts, so that's nothing new. "No news on the radio. They've got police searching nearby towns. She hasn't been seen since she was spotted on the platform. Parents are paying the muggles money for information."

"Great, well, if somebody sees her, we can head out," James agrees.

"And if the police get to her?"

"We can cross that bridge when we get to it."

Lily sighs. She rubs a hand over her shaved head. "We might have to give up the ghost at some point," she warns. "I doubt we were going to get anything out of her anyway, James—"

James waves a hand at her. "Let's not do this."

"I'd rather we do it now than after we've set off again on another half-baked exploit."

"Since when are our exploits half-baked?"

"Since they started failing halfway through."

James grimaces. Remus knows he knows what Lily's talking about; they've had enough arguments now about that night, about wingardium leviosa and Lily's body hurtling down the hallway like a crashing car.

"I'll go alone if you don't want to," he starts.

"We're not doing that," Remus puts in. "We're going together. At least for now. We can put off the... the going separate ways. For a few days, at least."

"Stolen time," James mutters. Neither of them dignifies him with an answer.

The radio tails off into a song. Something by some punks Sirius used to like that Remus doesn't know the name of. None of them speak; Lily sits down with her back against the dresser, sighing, and James lies down beside Remus again, dark, shorn head listing against the white pillowcase. Remus tries to pretend he's not examining him, taking in the way the back of his skull is shaped that he never got to see before. Lily has nicked the back of one of his ears; it's bleeding a bit. Remus wants to touch it and doesn't.

It's only five minutes later that, for about the dozenth time since they set off, bright white light blooms against the window.

Lily sighs, getting up to push it open. The patronus shoots inside like a bullet, landing on the carpet in a silver ball.

Remus closes his eyes and thinks he should take a short nap.

"Oh," James says beside him. "Hey, Remus. Look."

Remus glances up. The silver mesh has solidified and taken form, and it's smaller than Moody's boar; before Remus' eyes, it shifts and grows legs and blinks at them. A calico cat stands on the carpet in the middle of the hotel room, glowing. It looks mildly feral, like it's had a rough few months.

It opens its mouth, staring right at James. Dorcas' southeast accent floats out. "The dementors have been tracking her for you-know-who. They've closed in on a few different towns around Brighton. The Order's got a list. We're listening in on their meeting."

James rolls off the bed and to his feet in a flash, quicker than Remus has seen him move in quite some time. "Shit!" he says.

The cat's eyes follow James. "Pyecombe. Southease. Hassocks. Albourne. Poynings."

"Bloody English town names," Remus mutters.

And then the cat looks at him. "And Little Hangleton."

Remus feels himself freeze up. Oh. James is trying frantically to write them down on the back of his hand with a biro, but he pauses, looking at Remus curiously.

"What—" he starts.

The cat starts to disintegrate into silver mist. "Go while you can. They're trying to find you, too. They think you

kidnapped her. Stay alive.” Then, the patronus is gone.

“Oh, fuck,” James says. “Okay, so the towns were Pyecomb, Hassocks—”

“I know what town she’s in,” Remus cuts in, eerily calm.

James and Lily both look at him. As if possessed by a serenity he doesn’t have, Remus stands up from the bed, walks to the window and stares out over grey, windy Brighton.

“Remus?” Lily asks. She approaches, putting a hand on his shoulder.

“Little Hangleton,” Remus says. He turns to them both. “She’s in Little Hangleton.”

“How do you know?” James demands.

Remus shakes his head. “He... he mentioned it, once. Sort of halfway out of a nightmare.” The memory of it isn’t a pleasant one. “Said if he didn’t stay at Hogwarts, he’d end up... end up at Little Hangleton again.”

He coughs into his hand, trying not to look at James. He can still remember it like it was yesterday, the moonlight-pale sweat in a line across Sirius’ face, how he clutched the pillow so hard his nails tore through the case. *I can’t go back there*, he’d said, and Remus could tell that he wasn’t with him, wasn’t in that room. Wherever he was, it was far away from him. *I can’t*.

Remus travelled to Little Hangleton once, on a whim, in the summer before fifth when James was still convinced Sirius would be back in September. He’d known, even then, that he wouldn’t see Sirius again for a long time, had known it

like you know you're sick before the symptoms show. There had been nothing there to find, just old houses and boarded-up shops.

"You're sure?" James asks.

Remus nods. "How far is it from here?"

Lily is already peering at the map she got from the tourist desk at the train station. "There's a bus out there," she says. "Come on, let's get our stuff and go."

James is still staring at Remus. "He never told me about it," he says, a bit choked up.

Remus tries not to stare at James' shaved scalp. "I don't think he meant to say it."

"Still."

Remus shrugs. "Bus," he says. "Come on. Let's get—"

"—out of here," Sirius gasps. "Seriously. I don't think I can stand another fucking minute, I'll pass out—"

Galina rubs his back. "Head between your knees, that's it."

He's not hyperventilating, Sirius tells himself, as he hyperventilates. They're sitting in Berwick-upon-Tweed train station, both a bit soggy from the rain and the sea-spray, and the ground still feels like it's swaying even though they've been standing solid since they climbed off the boat in the port half an hour ago.

"You're alright," Galina murmurs, more order than affirmation. "Train will be here soon."

“This is so fucking crazy.” Sirius folds his working arm around his stomach, perhaps to keep his organs from leaping out of his mouth. “This is so fucking crazy. They’ll find us. He’ll find us. We should apparate back—”

He glances up, peering around. There are three other people on the platform; two conductors in high-vis jackets, and a muggle woman with a briefcase and a frown. None of them are paying him and Galina any mind. But any minute now, Riddle’s going to pop out of the sky, or a fucking wheelie bin, or something. Sirius is sure of it.

“We’re not going back,” Galina says firmly. Her hand doesn’t still on his back. “He’s not any less likely to find you here than in Reykjavik. Buck up. I know you’re scared. But we’re not going. Sânt är livet när kjolen är randig.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” Sirius demands. “That’s not— that’s not— that’s not Icelandic. That’s not Norwegian. You’re not even speaking fucking Ukranian. Fuck off, Galina. I can’t deal with this right now. Con comme une valise sans poignée. Comprenez vous?”

Galina snorts through her nose. “Rude.”

“Then don’t speak goddamn— Finnish, or, whatever.”

“It was Swedish.”

“They’re all the same.”

“I suppose they are.” Galina squints off down the line. The station is above-ground and open-roofed. The grey sky presses down on them from above. “Train’s coming.”

“Ours?”

"I presume."

Sirius shakes his head. "Can we go back?" he asks, almost a whine now. "Please. I can't do this. I can't. I just can't."

"Can't see him?"

"Can't be here." Every time Sirius sees a sign in English he thinks he's going to fall apart into lots of small pieces which cannot be reassembled. "Can't be back here."

"Come." Galina pulls him up under the arm and shuffles Sirius towards the platform's edge. He considers hurling himself off into the path of the train. It seems pretty tempting. "Your Riddle man won't be lurking under the seats of an English train."

"He might be." *He'd do anything to find me. Anything.*

Galina drops an arm around his shoulders. "Then he'll have to go through me to get to you."

Sirius tries not to relish the contact. The train draws closer, whistling down the line like the approach of death. "You promise?" he asks, feeling like a little kid.

Galina nods. "How's the arm?"

Sirius glances down at it. "It's shit with fear," he says, and flops it in her direction. Immobile from the elbow down; no fire to fuel it.

"Ah. I see."

"I'll try to get control of it. It doesn't like me when I'm afraid."

"You must be very afraid, to get around Dzintara's magic."

“Or maybe it only worked last time because Tom’s never afraid of anything,” Sirius mutters.

The train pulls up, whining and grinding to a stop. Galina steps forward, sort of dragging him with her, and presses the button on one of the doors to open it.

“I like to think he’s afraid of you,” she says contemplatively.

Sirius doesn’t think that sounds anywhere close to right. “Maybe,” he murmurs, and catches sight of himself in the reflection of the door as it opens; cloud of dark hair, pale skin, sallow eyes. His chest tightens. “I can’t breathe—”

Galina ushers him over the threshold and onto the train. The carriage they end up in is empty, and thank god, Sirius thinks, as he is pushed into a chair and his head is shoved between his knees again.

“Breathe,” Galina murmurs. “That’s it. Breathe.”

“He’s going to find me,” Sirius mumbles. “He’s here.”

Her other hand works through his hair, untangling the knots along his scalp. “The things they do to kids these days,” Sirius hears her shake her head. “You remind me of the war sometimes.”

“Which one?”

“All of them.” Galina sighs. “You remind me of all of them.”

“All of them,” Lily is saying. “Just, all of them, I don’t care —”

"I can't buy the whole vending machine," James protests.
"We've got two quid. Mars or Aero?"

"I don't know!" Lily snaps. She's pouring over her map again. She looks up only briefly. "Remus, are you getting off or not?"

"Sorry," Remus grunts, hobbling down the steps off the bus.
"You left me with our bags."

"Thanks," James tells him, taking his backpack off Remus.
"Mars or Aero?"

"Uhh." Remus squints at him. "Aero. We can share it."

"Thought you'd say that." James feeds a pound into the machine and punches in the right number. It's mid-afternoon already, after the long wait for the bus and the tired ride out of the city, and very overcast like it might rain.

"It's about a mile's walk that way, I think," Lily says, and points off down a turning in the road which leads through a desolate field. "See, houses in the distance? Past that bit of forest."

"It's not giving me my Aero," James says, and slams a fist into the side of the vending machine. A few other travellers at the open bus station stare.

Lily grabs his arm. "James. Come on."

James shakes her off. "I know!" Mournfully, he glances back at the vending machine, and then turns away. "Come on, then. Let's get going."

They set off in silence. Lily takes the lead and Remus walks behind James, sandwiching him in the middle of their single-file funeral march. Ahead, a dark cloud hangs over Little Hangleton. Already, James can taste the misery coming off the place in waves, thick and rust-tasting.

Behind him, like it's illicit, Remus takes James' hand. James squeezes it once and lets go. He hears Lily sigh.

"We'll be heading into the town from the south," Remus murmurs. "Dementors move with the wind. We might have stealth on our side."

"How do you know which way the wind's blowing?" James asks.

Remus shrugs. "Grew up rural."

"Fuck," Lily murmurs, up ahead. "Not that we could anyway, but does anybody know how to—"

"—cast a patronus?" Galina asks Sirius.

Sirius stares down at his dead, stupid arm. "I don't think I could do that on a good day," he says. "I've never cast one before, even with a wand."

"Right," Galina sighs. She scuffs at a stone in the road with her foot. "Well, I think mine should do the trick, then. Come, let's hurry. We want daylight on our side."

"I don't know why they're here," Sirius says, and sniffs, staring off towards the town on the horizon. Being back here sets his every nerve on edge.

"To guard it?" Galina offers.

Sirius shakes his head. "He knows that would draw people's attention. Or, he'd be paranoid it would. Little town like Little Hangleton. He wouldn't want it to look out of turn."

"Hmm," Galina hums.

"Not that I know what he's thinking or anything."

"Of course not." Galina squints at the horizon. "Maybe this is his way of baiting you. It could be a trap."

"Oh, don't say that," Sirius grunts, chest tightening. He slows to a stop in the road and pounds a fist against his sternum three times, trying to force oxygen in there.

"Shit."

Galina watches him for a moment. "We're not going back now," she says.

Sirius shakes his head, coughing. "We could."

"We won't."

"I can apparate back now."

Galina approaches him. Like she's trying to calm a scared animal, she puts her hands out in front of her. "But you won't."

Sirius gasps in a lungful of air. With purpose, he starts walking again.

"We're approaching the town from the north," Galina says, as she starts up next to him again. "Dementors move with the wind. They'll be coming at us head on."

"How do you know which way the wind's blowing?" Sirius asks, tucking his hands into his sleeves.

Galina cocks her head to the side. "I grew up rural," she sighs.

Over Little Hangleton, it begins to rain. To its south end, the dark mass of the forest seems to shake with it. In there, Sirius knows, is his prize, and his weapon, and the end of his life.

Night has begun to fall by the time they reach the town.

Remus aches from all the walking and running and not sleeping. He's barely out of the last moon, and the wolf clings to all his muscles and slows his joints, making him all creaky all over. James and Lily keep walking too fast and having to stop to wait for him to catch up; Remus can tell Lily wants to ask him to take the lead, but has decided against it.

Little Hangleton is like every other moorside town Remus has ever seen; and he's seen a lot of them. Most of the buildings were put up before the war, and they seem to echo with grief from then, cold and overfilled with it. Mostly abandoned. There's a tall, heavyset manor house on the side of a hill near the forest's edge, Regency era, Remus thinks, though he can't be sure. It's long-since fallen to disrepair with the passing of the years.

"God, it's creepy," James murmurs, and he shuffles to stand at Remus' side. The road tails off into two lanes rather than one, but most of the paint marking the carriageway has peeled and chipped away with the weather. Nobody's repainted it.

"I know," Remus says, staring around. The damp grey moors give in to greener fields for a stretch to their left that goes on a mile or so. A small farm, probably abandoned.

"Reckon anybody still lives here?"

Remus gestures to the village shop across the main road, which looks not-quite-yet-abandoned. Getting there, though. "Maybe. Probably not for long." It reminds him intensely of home, in a rotten sort of way.

Lily gestures for them to keep up with her. She's already started off down the main road through the town, and her pale, shaven head is too bright for this place, sticking out from the collar of her dark jacket.

Remus jogs to keep up, legs aching. He and James take her sides, staring around, as if expecting Amelie to come bursting out from behind a tree.

"I can see why she'd come here," James mutters. "Bit out of the way, innit?"

"You say that like she chose it. She isn't in her right mind," Lily says.

"I dunno. Seemed pretty in-her-right-mind when she sawed off her ropes and unlocked the window."

"Possessed people still have motor skills, don't they?" Remus asks.

"I don't know. I've never asked one," James replies.

Lily snaps her fingers at her sides, jittering with anxiety, or perhaps excitement, or maybe just annoyance. "I'll make a list of questions for next time."

"Including 'why do you keep biting people'," James agrees.

"And 'why don't you like my beef stew'," Remus offers.

"And 'could you stop pissing on our floor'," Lily finishes.

"Don't think she'd respond kindly to that last one," sighs James. "That was one of her favourite pastimes."

Remus goes to laugh and feels it catch in his throat. He throws out an arm to stop James and Lily in their tracks and halts in the middle of the road.

"Wait," he says.

James and Lily stop to look at him. "What's up, Moony?" James asks.

"I thought..." Remus stares around, moving slowly in a full circle, watching the skies and peering through all the gaps in the buildings on either side of them. Broken windows and grimy, between-the-wars grey architecture, boxy and hollow. "I thought I heard something."

Almost silently, he feels Lily take a position at his back, and James at his side. They all press together, watching. Waiting. The heavy chill of nearby dementors presses in.

"They're close," James says nervously. "Don't think they know we're here yet, though."

"Dementors are blind," Lily murmurs. "We can keep out of their way if we stay quiet and keep low. I think."

"If they've bloody Kissed her..." James trails off.

"Don't think there's much soul left in there to Kiss," Remus offers, sensing it isn't a comfort.

James shrugs tetchily against his shoulder. He opens his mouth to respond, but then Remus hears it again.

Distantly, there's someone crying in the town.

And Remus would know that voice anywhere

He doesn't think; he just runs.

"Hey!" James shouts after him. "Remus—"

But Remus is gone like a bat out of hell. He barrels off across the deserted road and through a gap between buildings, the walls of the alleyway squeezing in tight on him, so claustrophobic that he can't breathe, but he wouldn't be able to anyway, so he supposes he doesn't care. He comes bursting out of the end of the alleyway and onto a backroad, lined with gravel and a few tired-looking bungalow houses, low to the ground with iron rooftops and overgrown greenery spouting at their cracked bases.

He stares around wildly, trying to find the source of the sound; a hand lands on his arm and Remus flinches, careening backwards wildly.

It's James, and just behind him, Lily. They're looking at him like he's gone mad.

"Remus?" James asks him. "What's going on?"

And Remus hears it a third time; this time, he can make out the words.

"—don't lie awake and wonder every night? Wonder what I did—" Sirius is shouting, almost sobbing.

Remus takes off again, out of James' grip and down the gravel path towards a turning from the main stretch of town into a leafy borough. He hurtles over a ball of barbed-wire sitting on the ground like a tumbleweed, tangled up in

itself with years of storms, and careens around the turning, down a single-lane road which is so overgrown with thickets of nettles that they stretch all the way from one side to the other, as if reuniting with their kin there. Curls of nettles holding hands.

James and Lily are shouting his name behind him, pounding after him; Remus will be all bruise and no human left tomorrow. He doesn't have the consciousness to care. He sprints up an incline towards a cluster of old houses on the hill, leading up to the manor, and staggers to a halt, listening again, staring around wildly.

"Sirius!" he raises his voice to shout. "Sirius, where—"

James catches up with him, grabbing Remus' arm tightly with both hands. He wrangles him around to look him in the eye. "Remus! He's not here!"

Remus shakes him off. "I heard him! Sirius!"

Lily reaches them. She grabs Remus' other arm tightly. He gets the distinct feeling of being handcuffed to them both. He tries to shake them off him and can't.

"Let me go—"

"That wasn't him, Remus," Lily says grimly. Her eyes are darting; she puts out her other hand and rests it against Remus' forehead like she's checking his temperature.

It's deathly cold.

"Oh," Remus murmurs. He stumbles under the weight of realisation. It's not him. It's not him.

Sirius' voice fades closer, then, like a buzzing. Like inevitability. "It haunts me, Moony!"

"Stop it," Remus mumbles. "It's not real."

James' grip gets exponentially harder on his arm. Remus hears him scream, "Up there!"

Staggering under the weight of memory, Sirius' voice getting louder and louder in his ears, Remus looks up.

The sky is speckled black above them with a swirling mess of dementors, leering closer and closer towards them. Dozens. Their black cloaks ripple with the wind. Like hair swirling down a drain.

"Fuck," Remus murmurs, tongue heavy in his mouth. He can hear his own voice in his head now, too. *All you do is make everything about you. Did it ever fucking occur to you that you've got people who would miss you if you were gone? You can be so selfish and awful sometimes and I don't know why I still care.*

"Stay with us," James tells him, face very close to his. "Remus. Remus. Come on. Stay—"

But Remus feels his knees give out. He crumples to the ground like wet paper and James goes down with him. Nausea spins Remus in a circle. It does not let him down.

"Fuck," James says. He's on top of Remus, arms around his head. He's trying to keep them from kissing Remus, Remus realises, as he sees the ragged edge of a dementor's cloak pass close, too close, above them, twirling on the wind like a dancer. He imagines he's still in Wales, bits of dark plastic bag stuck between chunks of broken seawall. Lifting and swaying with the rising of a nearby storm.

I can't stop dreaming about him! Sirius yells in his head. *Every fucking night, and it's always the same, and if I tell anybody he'll kill me, he'll kill me and make me wish I'd never been alive in the first place. Fuck—*

It's the last time they talked, Remus remembers, on the last day of forth year, in the dorms before they left to get on the train. Funny that this is his worst memory. He wouldn't have guessed it, but it makes sense.

Then come home with me! Remus' own voice howls. *Come to Wales with me! Come anywhere with me!*

They'll come after James!

Fuck James!

Sirius' hazy voice sobs. *Fuck you, Remus, you jealous cunt, stop saying things you don't mean. Stop saying things. Fuck you! I hope you die! And stay out of my fucking business, and... and just stop, stop it, stop. I could kill you.*

"Remus," James' voice says from far away, rumbling through his chest. "Remus, stay awake. Please. Stay. Stay."

Distantly, Remus can hear Lily screaming. The dementors have swarmed around them, so close they block out the whole sky.

"James," he murmurs, around his heavy tongue. *I'll never be James, will I?!* he hears his fifteen year-old voice ask, two years and a million miles away.

James kisses him like he's trying to do the dementors' job for them. "Remus," he says against his mouth. *Maybe you won't be!* Sirius shouts. *Maybe you're nothing like him!* "Remus."

Lily's hand is on Remus' shoulder, draped there like she's not in control of it. Remus jerks his head away from James; the world swims around him. The face of a dementor leers close, and its mouth opens under its hood, pressing towards him, rotten teeth glinting. Remus sees Sirius' soul in there, black as night.

There's a burst of heat like an oil fire nearby, hot enough that it spits. Remus smells gunpowder or fuel, or gas, or perhaps it's blood. Silver light blossoms across his eyelids, and James' hand is in his, his fingernails stabbing Remus' palm and digging between the bones there like a graverobber.

And I'm sorry, he hears Sirius' voice say, fading like the ocean. *I'm sorry*.

Remus passes out.

"Sorry," Sirius gasps, clutching the wall to stay upright. Riddle's laughter; the grind of broken bones; James bleeding and wearing Andromeda's face; Dumbledore's burnt-out husk, like a ghost on the floor of Rosier Manor. "Sorry."

It's cold with the edge-of-your-teeth chill of dementors. He knows it well; they used to patrol Rosier Manor sometimes, in Tom's more paranoid moments. Every time Sirius blinks, he hears him louder. Closer. He can't breathe properly.

"It's alright." Galina calls her patronus back, and it circles around them both, returning warmth to Sirius. The nightingale lands on his shoulder and nuzzles his cheek serenely.

Little Hangleton seems to expand back into its true form around them, larger than life, not squeezes down into a tiny chasm anymore. Galina has had her patronus out for half an hour. The moment it left, spying a herd of dementors on the hillside nearby, Sirius began to fall apart.

He gasps in a breath, shaking his head back and forth like a dog. "Are they gone?"

Galina nods. "They'd crowded around a group of teens up there. Muggles, I think. I've scared them off, for now."

"Are they okay? The muggles."

"As far as I can tell."

"Right."

"A little shaken up, but alive. Their parents won't believe them when they tell the story." Galina touches his arm.

"Come. We have to keep moving."

Sirius hesitates. "Should we go help them get out of here?"

"If they've got any sense," Galina says, squinting off at the hillside Sirius can't see from his place crumpled against the wall. "They'll leave on their own."

She starts off down the road again at a brisk pace. Sirius follows her and the nightingale takes flight from his shoulder, zipping in circles around them. It's small but very bright, almost too bright to look at.

Sirius casts one more glance over his shoulder, in the direction of the hillside. Something seems to call him back, but he ignores it.

"Just a bit further down this road," he tells Galina, and coughs into his sleeve, a nervous tick. "And then we turn off between the, uh, old shops. To the path into the forest. There's an old park near there. They ripped up all the, uh, stuff in it. Because of the war."

"Mmm," Galina hums.

"The muggle war."

She laughs faintly. "I know which you meant."

Sirius fumbles with his hands, clicking the bones of the fingers on his left in and out. "I don't want to be here."

"I know."

"And we still haven't left yet."

"Sometimes," Galina says, with an air of wisdom. "The things we want and the things we need are separate."

"Sometimes, I hate you."

"You've made me well aware."

Sirius reaches a hand up to tug on the hair at his scalp, almost compulsively. "I want to cut it off," he says.

Galina shakes her head. "No, you don't," she says. "Is this the turning?"

"Next one along," Sirius mumbles. He drops his hand from his hair. "I wanted to ask Claude to cut it for me. In the way they do their hair. If I die here, I won't get to. And you'll have to explain to them that they didn't get a chance to. They'll be sad."

"It takes a lot to make Claude Archeambeau sad," Galina snorts. "I'll let them know."

"You were meant to say, 'Sirius, of course you won't die'."

"Have I ever lied to you?"

Sirius chews his lip. "By omission."

"It does not count. Language barrier."

Sirius shoves her, laughing a bit. Laughing helps, he realises. Maybe that was her intention, because she laughs a bit too. It's not grand or consuming. It sort of sits between them like a dead body. An elephant in the room. An elephant in the morgue. God, Sirius is mixing metaphors now, he must be really close to fucking losing it.

"One second," he says, pulling to a stop. "Is there a bin? Like a public bin."

Galina stares around, then points down the road. "At the shops," she says. "Around that corner. Why?"

Sirius walks intently down the road towards it, past the turning into the forest. He hears Galina sigh and follow him.

The world blurs, grey and brown and foul-smelling. Sirius rounds the corner and sees a public bin across the way, by the fence where the town gives way to a broad field, rusted and unchecked, empty without a plastic liner. He jogs towards it, opens the lid and throws up inside.

"Oh," he hears Galina sigh behind him. "You couldn't have —"

"—held it for a bit?" Lily asks.

James wipes his mouth, spitting out a the last bit of vomit in his mouth. It burns like battery acid. "Fuck. Help me get him up."

Remus is pale as death between them, head lolling against the dark grass. His acne stands out against his pale cheeks; he doesn't look quite human, stark against the mushy world.

"They didn't—"

"No," James says quickly. "They didn't kiss him. The patronus—"

"It wasn't mine," Lily rushes out. "It was... a bird."

"A nightingale," James puts in. "My family travelled to, uh, Ukraine, I think? Or something. Somewhere. When I was a kid. It's their national bird. They're noisy as anything. Ah, fuck, fucking god, my head hurts."

Lily claws her way across the mud to Remus' side and checks his breathing, kneeling with her ear to his mouth, watching his frail chest. "He's breathing. And he's got a pulse."

"I think he just passed out."

"Right. Right." Lily seems to shake herself. "We need to get out of here. Come on."

"But— but, Amelie—" James starts.

"Fuck Amelie!" Lily yells at him, bordering on a scream. "Help me!"

James scrabbles across to her and Remus, hefting Remus' cold arm around his shoulders. Lily takes his other side and they drag him down the hillside in staggering bursts, Remus' long legs dragging on the ground behind him, his knees brushing the grass.

The dementors are gone, but their coldness and terror remains. It won't be long until they return. It must have taken a powerful patronus to scare them off...

"You're sure it wasn't yours?" James asks again.

Lily nods impatiently. "I doubt mine would be a bird, anyway," she sniffs. "Not yours, either?"

James shakes his head. He's only properly conjured a patronus once, in fifth year in an abandoned classroom with Remus one night. The glow of it had been hard to look at straight on. He doesn't think it would be that bright anymore. "Mine's a stag."

"Makes sense," Lily says, a bit contemptuously. "Come on. Let's get into the forest; better cover."

They drag Remus back onto the main road, which seems emptier and wider now, as if the houses are leaning back to peer at them. James wraps his hand around Remus' wrist at his shoulder so hard he's sure it'll bruise. He hears Lily draw shaky breath after shaky breath.

"A bit further," she grunts. "There's a turning into the forest, there. We can figure out a new plan."

"Thought you'd want us to go home."

"Of course I do. But I know you better than that. And we can't take him home like this."

James rears his head to the side an inch so he can smell Remus' menthol shampoo. "Yeah," he murmurs. "Right."

They make it to a turning that veers off into the forest, down a path past a stripped old park, whose rusted gate screeches at them. James thinks he hears voices down the road, out of sight around a corner, but it's either the return of the dementors or it's ghosts, and he'd rather not stick around to find out, so he carries on, Remus a heavy weight across his shoulders.

They make it to the treeline. There's no clear path through the forest — there's probably nothing in there. James and Lily drag Remus over a jutting root that curls from the dry earth and into the darkness, which slips around them like stormclouds.

"Let's get a way's in," Lily murmurs, as if she's afraid of someone listening in. "Come on."

She and James drag Remus deeper into the copse, over more roots, edging between close-knit silver birch and oak and alder trees. Leaves tear at James' face and he tries to protect Remus' head with his free hand, holding it, fingers diving between locks of tawny hair. Lily twists her ankle and keeps walking on it stubbornly even as her knee begins to buckle.

Eventually, they come to a stop a half-mile from Little Hangleton. James lowers Remus to the ground, leaning him up against the trunk of a tree. Lily sits down heavily, nursing her ankle.

"Shit," she pants.

James waves a hand in front of Remus' face, kneeling beside him to look intently into his closed eyes. "Remus?" He

shakes him a little. "You with us?"

Remus groans, eyelids fluttering, but doesn't come to. James takes one of his hands and sits beside him, and pushes Remus' head onto his shoulder so he doesn't get bugs in his hair.

"This is so stupid," Lily says. She wipes her face and James realises she's crying, silently and without sobbing. "This is so stupid, James."

"He's okay."

"You don't know how close that was."

"But he's okay," James says again, desperately. "He's alright. It means we've got a guardian angel, right? Means there's somebody looking over us. Whatever that patronus was, or whoever cast it."

"Can you stop trying to find the silver lining here? We almost died!" Lily yells. "I had to hear my sister call me—and my—and—" And she trails off, all the momentum dying within her. "Oh, god."

James grabs at her. She sinks down beside him, curling against his side. Her breathing is fast and panicked; James feels like his is too slow, like he's shorting out.

"We're alright," James tells her uselessly. "Hey, it's exciting, right? For our final mission. Our real final mission. Something to remember when you're gone."

Lily makes a sound that isn't a laugh, but is perhaps trying to sound like one. "I hate you sometimes. You know neither of us is going to change our mind."

"I still have to say it. In case you forget I'm still here. And that I'll still be here when you leave."

She smacks his arm so hard it stings. "We're not going to forget that. Of course we're not."

"Still. Gonna keep saying it 'til you're gone. Weren't you supposed to have left by now? Remus, too. I'm clinging to this while I've still got it."

Lily shakes her head. "What did you hear? When the dementors came."

James scrunches up his nose. "I, uh." And he glances away from her. "I... it was, uh, Rosier. That day. Y'know, uh. Andromeda."

Lily shifts against him. "I'm sorry."

James shrugs. "Whatever Remus was remembering, it was worse."

"That isn't how that works. There isn't a 'worse'."

"I dunno." James touches Remus' hair, feeling like he probably isn't allowed to. "It feels—"

And he stops.

There's movement in the forest, down towards Little Hangleton.

"Fuck," he breathes.

Lily shifts closer to him. James watches her pull her knife out of her sleeve and spin it in her hand twice. The sky above them is dark enough that James can't make out her

face anymore, but he knows the expression she's wearing without having to look.

"Shh," she whispers. James obeys.

There are voices out there; he can't make out what they're saying. Distant talking, muted. Footsteps.

"Stay a bit behind me," a woman's voice calls. Slavic accent, or Nordic, or something, he can't really tell. "Okay?"

Whoever responds, they're too far away to hear.

"Yes, I know you don't." She sounds mildly amused. "My wand is enough for the both of us, no? We're alone, I think. Come on."

The sound of running footsteps. Murmuring, too low to hear. Whoever they are, the strangers move past James, Lily and Remus' hiding spot without stopping, and the sound of their movement disappears off into the underbrush.

"Shit," Lily whispers. "That was—"

"I'm going after them," James says, and pushes off the tree trunk to stand up.

Lily stares at him. "What?"

"That woman, she was Slavic. What if she cast the patronus?"

"Are you insane?!"

"She might have helped! They're magical, she talked about a wand—"

Lily's face morphs from shock to outrage. "Remus is unconscious! You can't just—"

"You can take care of him!"

"No I can't! He's the healer, not me—"

"Listen," James says, and waves his hands around, gesticulating that they should both be quiet. "I won't be long. I swear. I just want to see where they're going. Maybe they're with the Order!"

"And the Order are totally our friends right now—"

James lowers his voice. "Maybe," he says with intent, "they know where Amelie is. Maybe that's why they're here! Or—or if they're death eaters, I can try to fight them off—"

Lily is still looking at James like he's lost his head, and maybe he has. "Fight them off with what? We can't use magic, James, use your head, please—"

James slides his backpack off and fishes inside of it, a bit manic. He pulls out the baseball bat and swings it around in his hand a few times. "Element of surprise."

"Please don't do this—"

But James is already taking off in the direction the voices disappeared in. "I'll be back!" he promises, and then he's gone.

"I'll be back," Sirius promises, and goes to put a hand on the doorknob of the hut.

"Wait," Galina says, so sharply that he stops dead.

"What is it?"

Galina raises her wand and moves it in a long arc across the door. "It's warded. An alarm, probably. It'll lead him right to us."

"Shit," Sirius says, stepping back and staring around wildly. "Has it—"

"I think you have to touch the door to set it off." Galina grabs his arm and pulls it away from it. "You're okay. They don't know we're here." The 'yet' is silent.

"We have to find another way in." Sirius wraps his arm around himself, shuddering a bit, though it isn't with cold. He tries to shake some feeling back into his right arm, which is completely numb now, tingling like it's full of pins and needles. "Around the back."

Galina nods. She raises her wand and stalks like a predator around the side of the hut, casting a detection charm over a boarded-up window. "Warded, too. Shit."

Sirius creeps around the other side. There are two more windows, one of them broken, the other with planks of the wood obscuring it beginning to fall off, decaying on the ground below.

He remembers it like it was yesterday, being here. The whip-crack pain of a slap across the face. Stone against his back. The crumbling foundations of this place were barely able to hold up under the weight of bad magic; Sirius is surprised it's still standing. And fuck, he's shaking like a leaf.

Galina comes around the other side of the shack to his side. "They're all warded, I believe," she says grimly. "Hard to

detect, too. For English wizards, anyway."

"Not a spell they teach at Hogwarts?"

"Not unless you're looking for it."

Sirius nods, chewing his lip. It would have gotten him if Galina hadn't been here. "Thanks," he murmurs.

Something moves in the corner of the window in front of him. Sirius lurches backwards, thinking of death eaters, of Riddle, of death coming so quick and hot he won't even feel it before it's taken him.

But it's a bird, he sees. A starling, sitting in a small nest in the nook of the corner of the window, sheltered under a broken slab of wood. It has a smattering of green feathers across its black back, and there are three eggs in the knot of dried grass and twigs. It blinks at Sirius and Galina and then takes flight, cawing, into the trees.

"Hey," Sirius murmurs. "Try this window?"

Galina accommodates. She inhales sharply, then looks at Sirius, a smile tugging at the corner of her lips.

"Not warded," she assents. "Birds must have tampered with it."

Sirius swarms forwards, wrapping his hands around a plank of wood and pulling on it hard. It comes loose in his hands, hollow in the middle like marrow with age. Galina waves her wand to levitate the rest away, and then steps past Sirius and plunges her elbow through the brittle glass window, which shatters in a hole around it. She elbows it again, and then once more, until the last of it falls away.

"You first," she instructs. "Careful of the glass."

"I'm always careful," Sirius says. He clambers up onto the windowsill, avoiding crushing the little nest, full of speckled eggs. The wind whips up against his back. He swings one leg over and then the other, and drops silently onto the floor inside, crunching a bit on the glass.

It looks exactly like it did then. The body of the ministry worker is gone, but his blood still darkens the floor in a stained patch across the room. The floorboards are curling under their own rot, as if coming alive. Dust hangs so thickly on the air that it's hard to breathe.

Sirius shudders, trying not to look. He turns around to the window. "Galina?"

Galina's staring off into the woods in the direction they came from. She startles at Sirius' voice and seems to shake herself.

"I thought I heard something," she says.

Something moves in the bushes behind her.

"Galina!" Sirius hollers. "Watch—"

She lurches around. A dark shape comes hurtling from the underbrush. Short and bedraggled. Whoever it is, they're in torn-up robes, and they scream as they launch towards Galina.

"Stupefy," Galina spits.

The figure goes down like a log.

"What—" Sirius starts.

"Stay there!" Galina shouts, not turning around. She prods the stranger once with the toe of her boot and then spins in a wide circle, staring around, drinking in every inch of her surroundings.

"They know we're here—"

She shakes her head once. "This is no death eater."

"What?"

Galina reaches down and grabs her attacker by the robes, hauling it towards the window. She lifts it up and drops it over the glass into Sirius' arms. Sirius staggers under its weight and looks down into its face.

And it's Amelie Bullstrode.

Sirius drops her into the glass as if he's been burnt. She hits the floor half on her back. The diary is clutched in one of her half-lax hands.

"Oh, fuck," he says. "Oh, no. Oh no. Oh no."

Galina drops down from the windowsill to stand beside him. "You know her?"

Sirius staggers back to lean against the wall. "Shit," he says with passion.

"Figured." Galina brushes broken glass off her hands as if it's sand and stares around. "Smells like something's died in here."

"Something did," Sirius heaves. He gets the distinct impression he would have thrown up again if he had anything left in his stomach.

On the ground, Amelie groans. She's got blood on her face from an injury Sirius can't pick out. Her robes are so grimy it's as if she hasn't washed in a month, and maybe she hasn't. Sirius knows one thing for sure; whatever the diary did to her, it's bad. It's killing her.

"You want me to stun her again?" Galina asks.

Sirius shakes his head. He watches intently as Amelie groans again, throat thick like there's blood in it. She doesn't open her eyes, but the hand holding the diary stretches out across the floor, towards...

And then he understands.

"The ring," he murmurs. "It's still here."

"What?" Galina asks.

Sirius points to a spot in the floorboards across the room. "That's where he hid it. He hasn't moved it. And Amelie..."

"That's her name?"

Sirius nods. "And the diary, that's another one."

Galina's face morphs. She reaches out to grab it.

"Don't!" Sirius shouts.

She pauses. "Why?"

"Look."

And they both watch. Amelie isn't even conscious yet, but her feet scrabble along the floor like she's trying to push herself forward. She is grotesque and malformed; she pushes the diary out in front of her.

She's trying to reunite it with its counterpart.

"Should I be stopping her?" Galina asks, when Amelie is halfway across the room, dragging blood and filth in a spotty trail behind her.

Sirius shakes his head. "I'll do it. We... we just need to get them both, and we'll go."

Very gingerly, he reaches down and plucks the diary from Amelie's hands. Still more unconscious than not, she growls in the back of her throat, then goes completely limp.

The chunk of Riddle's soul sits in Sirius' hands, staring up at him. When Sirius flicks it open, it's completely blank inside.

"Huh," he murmurs.

Galina comes to stand at his shoulder. Her reassuring presence grounds him. "You're sure that's one of them?"

Sirius nods. Slowly, he reaches around to drop it into his back pocket. He can deal with it later.

"Then we just have to get the last one," Galina says with confidence. She waves her wand. "It isn't warded."

"Yeah. I know it's not." Somehow, he just does.

Sirius steels himself. He steps over the patch of blood and across the room, kneeling beside the loose floorboard. With one hand, he peels it back. It comes loose with mocking ease.

And under it, lying in the dirt, sits the ring. It glints in the dim light at him.

"It's still there?" Galina asks.

Sirius nods. He hovers a hand over it, hardly able to believe his luck. "Yeah," he whispers. "It's still here."

Galina clunks across the room towards him. "Well," she says. "We should take it and—"

And she stutters to a stop.

Sirius looks up at her. Time seems to slow.

Galina is staring down at the ring with a look on her face he thinks he's never seen before, and then recognises it all at once. The end-of-the-world grief she held across her harsh features when Yí'ān was injured on that distress call to Berlin. For that moment she thought he was dead, it was as if the universe had come crashing down around her; she looked haunted by so vast and deep a suffering that it couldn't be put to words.

She looks haunted in the same way now. All ghost, no person left.

"Galina?" Sirius hears himself ask. His voice sounds very small.

She lunges for the ring.

"NO!" Sirius screams, but it's too late; Galina has plunged it onto her finger.

Multiple things happen in the same moment.

The door to the shack goes flying open. Sirius whirls around and feels his face, his whole body, go slack. James shaved his head, he realises in the back of his mind. He shaved his head, and he's gotten taller and narrower and he looks angrier than Sirius has ever seen him.

"Sirius?" James asks, voice going breathless. "Pads?"

Behind him, Galina shouts with pain. Sirius whips around to look at her and sees her fly back against the wall with a horrific sound, blackness spreading like a plague across her hand.

Then, the cracks of apparition outside; everything falls to pieces.

James doesn't think, he just moves.

A flash of sickly green light flies through the door behind him, missing his head by an inch; he flattens himself low and runs to Sirius, reaching for him. The walls shudder and then the whole shack rattles with an explosion. Death eaters, he knows instinctually, and careens into Sirius' side, knocking them both into the wall.

"Holy shit!" he hears himself say. "Holy shit, oh my god. Blood hell. Fucking hell. Hello."

The walls rattle again; dark-robed figures swarm outside, James can see their masks glint through the broken window. They have seconds, maybe less.

Under him, Sirius is staring at James like he's never seen him before. His gaze flickers between each of James' eyes like it doesn't know which to settle on. "You cut your hair," he whispers.

James laughs. "I'll grow it out again. Things will be okay now. Remus is here— we can go back to London together— oh god, Pads. Jesus Christ."

Sirius touches his shoulder like he isn't sure if James is really there. "You shouldn't be here."

"We came here looking for Amelie—"

"She's over there." Sirius gestures to her. "I'm taking the diary. Gonna destroy it. She'll be okay."

"The diary? What—"

Against the wall, the old woman groans. "Sirius, run—"

Sirius flinches hard. He scrambles out from under James and runs to her side, crouching there. "Galina! Are you hurt —"

James watches in horror as she raises her right hand. It's shrivelled and blackened like it's been burnt. Involuntarily, he thinks of Dumbledore, and how he looked as he died. A husk; no longer a person.

"Take the ring off," she groans. "Take it off."

Sirius scrabbles his fingers against her wizened skin, chest rattling with what might be a sob; James has never heard him cry before. "You're so fucking stupid—"

A spell flies through the smashed window, then another, both bright red and spitting flames as they hit the wall and scorch it. James gets the distinct impression as he huddles against the floor, arms over his head, that they're not disarming spells.

"Sirius!" he yells. "Sirius, what's going on— what is this—"

"No time to explain!" Sirius yells. "Shit, Galina— Galina, breathe—"

The old woman is dragging in frantic, gasping breaths that rattle through her as if she's hollow all the way through. One of her hands finds the side of Sirius' face and touches it, and then drops to the floor. She's choking on nothing.

James crawls to them. "What can I do— how can I help—"

Sirius grabs the woman's — Galina's — wrist and pulls the ring on her finger off, holding the sleeves of his jacket around his hands to keep from touching it. James watches him shove it into his pocket. "You need to get out of here. Now!"

"I can't disapparate! The Trace!"

"Shit!" Sirius swears loudly. James can't stop staring at him. His hair is longer now, down to his elbows, hanging in loose curls around his shoulders. He looks a bit broader, healthier than he did when he was in Rosier. One of his arms is limp like it's been broken.

"What happened to you?" James asks.

Another spell pings off the window pane across the room, and two more fly through the open door, burning holes through the roof. The acrid smell of burning wood fills the air.

Sirius looks back at him, for the barest second. "I'm so sorry," he says. "James—"

"Incendio!" screams a voice outside; the roof catches aflame.

James shouts out, throwing his arms above his head. Almost immediately, the room fills with smoke, so thick he can't see anything; robed figures pour inside; somebody throws a

spell at him that he misses so narrowly he can smell it burning his clothes. The room is thick with voices. Someone grabs his wrist and James shakes them off and dives towards Sirius, trying to find him in the haze. Above them, flames rip through the ceiling. They have moments until it begins to fall in.

Someone grabs him. A white mask leers out of the darkness at James, shaped like a skull. James kicks out, yelling. He wraps a hand around the baseball bat and whips it around and slams it into the side of their head.

The death eater crumples. "Holy shit!" he hears Sirius shout.

A spell flies from the darkness towards James. He dodges and hurtles right into the way of another, which cracks something in the front of his chest, a rib or maybe his breastbone. Pain flares inside him, lashes like an ocean. He hits the floor.

Sirius is on the floor too. Above them, firelight blossoms through the smoke. The world seems to slow. James crawls to him. Sirius crawls to meet him. They find each other in the centre.

"Something's broken," James coughs. "Fuck."

"Shit." Sirius' grey eyes find him through the gloom. They stare at one another and James thinks he has never understood anybody better than he understands Sirius when he himself is dying and Sirius is watching it. They are the most themselves like this, James almost not here at all, Sirius near him. It feels like it did last year.

Spells lurch like ghosts through the gloom. The old woman is gasping for breath like she's choking. Sirius' broken arm

moves, scrambling to find purchase on the ground. He pushes himself up and shoves something on James. A notebook and pen.

“‘Help’,” he says. “Write ‘help’.”

“What?” James asks, head spinning with pain-wrought nausea.

But Sirius clambers to his feet. He’s trembling all over. His right arm is twitching. The fingertips seem to glow.

James scrambles to grab the notebook and pen. He would do anything Sirius asked him to, he remembers, heady with the familiarity of this. He’d jump off a cliff into the bloody ocean.

HELP US, he writes.

Sirius lets out a wordless shout. His right hand moves in a twitching arc around himself and the floor seems to surge upwards, hot with power. There are screams. The walls rattle and twist, leering. The air fills with the smell of bad magic, rotten magic; there it something dead in it, something so poisonous it could kill them all.

Sirius’ jacket whips around him. Something hits the floor near James’ hands. The ring. Instinctively, he picks it up with his sleeve and puts it in his pocket.

Something barrels through the mess towards them. Sirius raises his hand to smite it like an angel of fucking vengeance.

“No!” James yells, just in time. Lily and Remus pour from the smoke, collapsing at James’ side, coughing and wheezing.

“What’s going on?!” Lily asks, almost a scream.

Remus meets his gaze through the firelight. “He’s here?”

James gestures up at Sirius, who stands silhouetted against the burning roof mere feet away. Remus looks up at him, hungry eyes tearing apart the smoke as they find him there. Sirius looks back. They stare at one another for too long.

A dark-robed figure melts from the smoke behind Sirius, raising its wand. Its pale face leers out of the dark.

“NO!” James shouts. He doesn’t think; he reaches over to grab Galina’s wand, lying cold at her side, and points it. “EXPELLIARMUS!”

Like a miracle — truly a miracle — the wand goes spinning out of Lord Voldemort’s hands and hits the wall. Sirius lurches around and James watches his entire body go stiff. His arm flops against his side, limp and dark.

“Hello, Sirius,” Voldemort says. He looks down at Sirius’ arm and back up at him, and then raises his own.

Remus Lupin is having a bad day. But what else is new, he supposes, as he stares up at the inhuman face of the Dark Lord.

“Run!” Sirius yells over his shoulder. “Run, go—”

He’s staggering backwards, one shaky foot after the other. James scrambles halfway to his feet and crumples, clutching at his chest and gasping with pain. The roof is going to fall in soon. They’re running out of time. Death looms over Remus and extends its hands towards him.

Lily gets to her feet. Remus catches a glimpse of her grim face and he knows that look. There's a stray floorboard on the ground near their feet, beside an empty chasm of wood. She grabs it and hurtles through the smoke, past Sirius, whipping the plank in a broad arc into the side of Voldemort's face.

He doesn't even stumble.

"Run!" Sirius shouts again. He grabs Lily by the back of her jacket and throws her bodily at the door. One of his feet lashes out behind him to kick at Remus. "He doesn't need a wand to hurt you! Go! Go, run!" Remus has never heard him sound so desperate.

Voldemort laughs. It rattles from him like a bird in a cage. "You came back to me," he purrs. "I knew you couldn't stay away."

Sirius freezes up like he's been petrified. "Please," he says. Remus doesn't know what he's begging for. "Please, Tom. Please don't."

"Have you gotten cold feet, then?"

A shaking breath. "If that's what you want," Sirius replies.

"Still presumptuous as ever."

"Let them go, Riddle. Tom. Please."

Remus army-crawls to James' side, feeling at his chest through his shirt. Something has cracked out of place in there; a ridge of bone lances out of the skin of his chest, straining against it. Firelight dances across James' brown face and casts him into a ghastly haze.

"You're okay," Remus murmurs. "You're alright."

"I know." James slings an arm around his neck and together, they stagger to their feet. "Sirius—"

Ahead, Sirius is still frozen. Riddle waves a hand and the flames licking the ceiling above them slow to a crawl, dancing in frozen nature morte. His fingers burn with force, metric fucking tons of it.

Lily runs back to James' side, lifting him up under the arms. Of course she didn't run; she would never run.

"We need to go!" she yells. "We need to go right now, we need to—"

Riddle raises his hand again. He slashes it in their direction and Lily barely ducks a flash of green, screaming. Remus shoves her and James towards the door, through the consuming smoke.

"No!" he hears Sirius shout. "Leave them out of this!"

"You remember what I told you, don't you?" Riddle's rough, rattly voice asks. "You remember what I promised."

"They've got nothing to give you."

Remus shoves Lily and James towards the light of the doorway and they scatter across the floor like glass, piling over a body; a death eater, caught by a stray spell or passed out from the smoke. Then, he steels himself and turns back around.

Sirius and Voldemort are staring at one another with such intent in their faces that they scarcely look like people

anymore. Or maybe that's not their faces; maybe it's something else.

Remus takes a hesitant step towards them. Over Voldemort's shoulder, Sirius shakes his head at him desperately, as if to tell him to run. But he's not going to run.

In a flash of movement so quick it's dizzying, Riddle lashes out a hand and clenches it around Sirius' right wrist. He pulls it up to his face and examines it. Remus watches Sirius' eyes go blank with animal terror.

"Dzintara's work, I see," Voldemort murmurs. "I'll have to have a word with her. And your friend back there."

On the ground, an old woman Remus hadn't noticed before moans feebly. Black veins track like poison up the side of her face, pulsing under her papery skin.

"Leave them alone," Sirius snarls. His tone isn't enough to back up the threat in the words; his voice cracks. "Please."

"Saying please won't get you anywhere with me anymore."

"It never did."

Remus glances over his shoulder at Lily and James, who have collapsed against the wall beside the door. There are enough death eaters to kill them all. There's no way out. When Remus looks back at Sirius and Voldemort, they're still watching each other like predator and prey, as if waiting for the other to pounce.

"I have something you need," Sirius says, hinging on hysterical. "If you let them go, I can show you."

"Don't lie to me." Riddle shakes his wrist hard enough that Sirius' whole body jolts with it. "You're afraid. I know."

"Did you expect anything else from me?"

"I expected less."

"Then I'm glad not to disappoint," Sirius says, and bares his teeth, a bit mad-looking.

Riddle tosses Sirius' wrist back at him, like it's something useless. It swings limp at his side. "It's the only thing you've ever managed to achieve."

Remus is frozen in place. He wants to run, to take James and Lily and to get out of here while they still can. He wants to step forward and put his hands around Riddle's throat and squeeze. He wants to grab Sirius and not let go. He stays rooted to the spot.

"Then at least I've made your life a little worse in the time I've known you," Sirius says breathily. "That's enough for me." His eyes flicker from Remus to James, and then back to Riddle's face.

Then, his right hand snakes behind himself and he pulls out something dark, holding it tight. The diary.

"Don't move," Sirius warns. "I can destroy this. You know I can."

Riddle goes very still. Then, he laughs. "You won't do it. You don't have the nerve."

"Watch me. I'll blow it to fucking pieces."

"Give it to me. Now, if you please."

Sirius gestures with his free hand to his right wrist. "Basilisk fang," he snaps, and steps back, holding the diary out of Voldemort's reach.

"Some of her best work, I'm sure. But you're matched."

Sirius raises his chin. He's still trembling. "Then take it."

Riddle doesn't move.

"Take it," Sirius repeats. "Come on. Take it off me." He laughs in the back of his throat and points to Riddle's right hand, which has fallen to his side. "You're afraid."

The movement is so quick that Remus doesn't even see it properly. Voldemort raises his grey left hand and grabs Sirius by the hair, hurtling him into the wall. There's an ugly crack like a broken nose.

Sirius shouts out, clutching the diary tightly to his chest. The flames above seem to go silent. The world holds its breath.

Riddle leans over him. "Diary. Now."

There's a sharp crack. For a moment, Remus thinks Voldemort has broken Sirius' skull, and then the sound registers. Apparition.

A very tall figure appears behind Voldemort, taller than anybody Remus has ever seen, except Hagrid. They have wild, dark hair. They put their hand on the Dark Lord's shoulder.

"Get away from him," they say calmly, and they draw a long knife from a strap across their back.

Riddle spins in a swirl of dark robes. He lunges back out of the way as the stranger plunges their blade towards him and then they're fighting, Voldemort hurtling magic from his open palm in dark slashes, the stranger darting around him with a knife in one hand and a wand in the other. It's almost a dance. They lurch towards the wall and Sirius scrambles out of their way, bleeding from the nose and one of his eyes.

Remus runs to his side. "Sirius—"

Sirius looks up at him. It's the first time they've spoken face to face in two years. It feels like decades.

"I'm sorry," Sirius says, without seeming to think about it. "Moons, I'm so sorry. I'm so fucking sorry."

"Don't say that," Remus replies. He wipes at the blood with his sleeve. "Come back with us."

"I can't."

"Fuck that. Come with us."

Sirius seems to actually consider it. He leans his face up towards Remus' and Remus thinks he might kiss him, but instead, their foreheads find each other.

"Please," Remus murmurs. "Just come home. Come with me to Wales. Come with me anywhere."

A hand claps down on Sirius' shoulder. Both of them flinch. There's a man standing over them; at first, Remus thinks it's James, but he's older and broader, with a smile-wrinkled face.

"Alright lads?" he asks, squinting through the smoke.

"Yí'ān," Sirius exhales. "He found us. Galina—"

Yí'ān looks past Sirius to the older woman, crumpled against the wall. "What happened?!" he asks desperately.

"I don't know." Sirius wipes his eyes with the heel of his hand. "I... I'm so sorry."

Yí'ān shakes his head. "Come on." He offers a hand to Sirius.

Sirius takes it tentatively. "Don't drop me," he says.

"I would never," Yí'ān says, pulling him to his feet. "Who's this?"

"Remus," Sirius replies. "The Welsh one."

"Ah. Dewi Sant."

"What?" Remus asks.

Yí'ān shakes his head, hair flopping. "Claude can't hold him off for long. I had to drag them off a mission. Bloody fucking pureblood freaks. Come on, we're going home."

"But—" Sirius looks from Yí'ān to James to Remus. "But—"

"You can come back later," Yí'ān promises. "Say your goodbyes. I'm taking Galina, I'll come back to you."

He steps away from Sirius, running to the old woman's side. Remus watches him sink to his knees, talking to her in a murmur before grabbing her arm and disappearing.

Nearby, there's a shout. Remus and Sirius both turn to stare. Claude, the tall one, is sunken against the wall, clutching bleeding ribs.

"CLAUDE!" Sirius howls, and goes to run to them.

Remus grabs him around the middle. "No! Look!"

There are figures running in, through the smoke, but they're not in death eater masks; Remus hears Moody's wooden leg clunking on the floorboards, catches a glimpse of Caradoc Dearborn through the haze. Riddle spins around and parries five different spells, hand lashing through the air, face a pale blur of fury. Not afraid anymore, evidently, or maybe just too angry to feel it.

Claude limps to them both. "Quite the fighter there," they wheeze. "It has been years since I lost a fight. You're alright?"

"Fine," Sirius promises. "You got hurt."

They wave a hand at him. "Yí'ān?"

"Back soon."

"Sirius!" a voice calls. Through the flying spells and hovering smoke, James and Lily hobble over to them.

"James," Sirius says, and his voice breaks.

James throws his arms around Sirius' waist, squeezing him so hard it must hurt. Sirius hugs back, gentle and then desperate, squeezing tight around the back of James' neck. He meets Remus' eyes over his shoulder and gestures for Remus to join them. Remus takes a step forward and then a step back, and then shakes his head.

"You're leaving again," he says.

James pulls away, hacking a bit of blood out of his mouth.
"You're going?!"

"Only for now." Sirius stares down at the diary in his hand.
"If he wanted me before, he'll want me even more now—"

"We can protect you!"

Claude's hand on Sirius' shoulder tightens incrementally.
"He's coming back with us."

"Who are you?" James asks.

"Friends," Sirius says. His eyes are so wide they seem to fill his face up. "They're a friend. We don't have much time—"

McGonagall staggers out of the spellfire towards them.
"What are you standing around for?!" she shouts. "Run!"

"Not until you come back with us," James says sternly.
"We've been looking for you— I'd go anywhere—"

Remus' heart hurts. "James..."

There's another crack. Yí'ān is there then, taking Sirius' other side. He's the same height as Sirius, but he seems as tall as a giant.

"You can catch up another time," Yí'ān says tightly. "Say your goodbyes, Sirius. Galina's... she's not looking good. We need to get back."

Sirius' face crumples. He hugs James again, tightly, and then all too soon he pulls away.

"I promise you'll see me again," he says, and Remus wants to laugh at him. "There are just things I... I can't say..."

James shakes his head. “We’re separating,” he blurts out, like it’ll do anything to change this. “All of us. Because we can’t keep this up. But if you come back, they can stay, we can stay, we can stay together—”

Lily glances at Remus askance. Remus doesn’t return the look.

“I’m sorry,” Sirius tells him, voice shaking. “Just stay safe for me. Okay? And I’ll be back. I’ll come back. I’ll find my way back to you.”

“That’s not enough—” James starts to say.

Yíān steps forward, taking Sirius’ arm. “Sorry, boys,” he says, and he twists on the spot, pulling Sirius into the ether and away from them.

James seems to crumble. Remus catches him. The sounds of fighting die around them.

“Fuck,” James whispers. “Fuck, Remus. He’s gone again.”

Remus wipes his eyes with an ashy hand. He knows only three things: Sirius is never going to change, this war is never going to end, and the wolf has lost everything it held dear. Now, it can’t trust anybody. It howls in Padfoot’s absence, burning with it. Magnetism and soulmates are nice words, but ash is ash, and Sirius has burned whatever they had left to the ground.

“Come on,” Lily says, in a voice hot with rage. She takes James’ side. “I need to get on a boat to bloody Rostock.”

END OF PART ONE

Chapter End Notes

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THE NEW WAR

Chapter Notes

okay so i said a week or two. and then i couldn't stay away.

this chapter is a bit of a change of pace. it'll be a bit jarring, i think! but trust me, okay? just trust me and the process. and we'll get there together.

tws: drowning, violence, allusions to sexual assault (blink-and-you'll-miss-it), injury, self harm (via skin-picking), dark themes, trauma, ptsd/acute trauma response

ps: i havent been able to respond to all the WONDERFUL comments on chapter twenty because this week has been the last week of semester and all the work has wiped me out. im going to start responding to comments again on this chapter onwards! as a rule, i usually dont respond to comments on previous chapters (i.e. from readers who are commenting on each, starting from the beginning), but know that i read them and i love them.

enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

PART TWO - TRANSIT

A ghost appears at the bottom of the grassy slope. From the top of the hill, he's hard to make out as he stalks from the dark mass of the forest to the rocky tertiary, black against

the rippling ocean of light coming off the burning house. He looks quite resigned as he watches the manor house burn, like he'd expected something like this, and his shoulders droop a bit as one of the spires on the roof collapses. The stink of burning oak fills the air and leaves it tasting thick and tacky.

"Is that you?" Marlene calls down, and wipes petrol off her hand

He looks up at her. There's a knife in one of his fists.

"McKinnon?" he asks. She raises her chin; he raises the knife and starts up the hill.

Marlene digs a petrol-sticky hand into her jacket and pulls out her own switchblade. It's hot against her palm like it's trying to dig its way in there. She backs up across the plateau, boots squelching in the heavy black mud. Below, the house burns louder and faster, flames billowing towards the dark blue sky. The smoke must be visible for miles.

Black climbs to the top of the hill and stares at her, knife half-up. Marlene bares her teeth at him.

"Let me get a good look at you," she says, and advances, stalking through the damp grass.

"Stay back," he warns, without seeming to mean it.

Marlene makes a scoffing noise. She reaches him, raising the knife to poke it up under his chin until he raises it. His face blurs with flickering light. He stares right into her eyes and presses the tip of his blade into the juncture of her armpit. They watch one another, heads tilted backwards in challenge.

"It's you," Marlene says after a moment.

By the light of the fire, Regulus Black's face still isn't quite his brother's. He obviously didn't inherit the family's good looks. There's a thin scar running pale across the top of his forehead, like somebody's tried to scalp him. He has the general air of a person who has been running for some time, and is in desperate need of some rest. It's unmistakably him, though. Most everyone is white out here, and most everyone doesn't look like they just crawled out of hell itself.

"You're burning down Guthy-Parker manor," Black replies.

"Suppose we've both got things to be ashamed of."

Black stares at her. Slowly, he lowers his knife back to his side.

"Ha," Marlene says, and lunges forwards and shoves him so hard he falls over, scattering into the mud.

Cursing, Black scrambles back and raises his knife. Marlene kicks it out of his hand and it sticks in the mud a few feet away from his head. She raises her boot again to punt him upside the head with it.

Black's grey eyes blow wide and he covers his face with his arms, cowering. "Behind you!" he yelps.

Behind you! Mary screamed, Marlene remembers, the first time they had a near-miss. Snatchers on the south end of Baltinglass stalked them all evening and into the following morning, through the cold summer night, over misted moors and through the brambles crusted with salt from the ocean not far away. They hid out in an abandoned

farmhouse on the fringe and neither of them stopped shaking for weeks.

She spins around. The pyre below the hill spins across her vision like a light show, but there's nobody there; no snatchers, no Mary, not even the hovering presence of a nearby storm. Hot wind whips her face.

Black's foot slams into the back of her knee. Marlene hits the ground hard, on her shins and then her elbows, and rolls over in time to dodge a swing of his mud-crusted knife as Black lurches at her like a drunkard.

They tussle. Marlene hooks the front of her ankle around his neck and drives Black's face into the wet grass, and he spins the knife in his hand to slam the handle into her foot over and over, hard enough to bruise. Dark grass and black mud scatter as his feet slide in the mud behind him. The darkening sky has misted with rain, and now it begins to fall, hitting Marlene's hot forehead as she torpedoes forwards onto her left knee and grabs a fistful of Black's hair in her hand, winding her fingers through it for purchase and mashing his face against the earth.

"Drop the knife!" she snaps. "Now!"

Black obeys, wriggling a bit. Marlene drops his head, unwinding her fingers from his hair. His face drops towards the mud and he promptly picks the blade back up again and rolls over to swing it towards her, stopping a bare inch from her face. The blade hovers there, the tip centimetres from Marlene's left eye.

"Why are you burning down a manor house in southern France, of all places?" he demands.

"Why are you *visiting* a manor house in southern France?" Marlene shoots back. "James said you're in Durmstrang."

"James?"

"James Potter."

"I know who James Potter is," Regulus snaps. Of course he does; Marlene thinks his older brother wouldn't be able to shut up about James for five minutes anywhere, in any universe. "How did he know?"

Marlene shrugs. "Fuck if I know. Now can you drop the knife?"

Regulus uses his free hand to wipe the mud from his crazed face. There's a bit of blood there too, where a rock has dug into the crease between his brows. He's got sort of hysterical eyes, a bit too wide. Marlene can relate to that look in them.

"You won't attack me again?" he confirms.

"I'm not a violent person."

"You have yet to prove to me otherwise."

"Get the fucking knife away from my face," Marlene sighs.

Regulus obeys. They crawl backwards away from one another, both muddy and tired, unwilling to fight anymore but unwilling to trust one another, either.

"We used to come here in the summers," Regulus offers stiffly, putting a hand under himself to stay upright.

"Sometimes. My father and I. When I was young. It's abandoned most of the year. The Guthy-Parkers only stay

here in the winter. And since it's July and I needed a place to stay..."

"Needed a place to stay?"

Regulus eyes her. "Why are you burning it down?"

"The Guthy-Parkers are death eaters."

"Everyone's a death eater these days."

"Watch it," Marlene snaps.

Regulus raises his hands, one still clutching his knife, his thumb holding the handle to the dirty, white palm. "I didn't come here to see them or anything. The Dark Lord isn't exactly my friend right now, either."

"Why?" demands Marlene. The heat of the blaze has begun to warm her back through the canvas jacket. She wouldn't be surprised if she woke up sunburnt tomorrow.

Watching her, Regulus shuffles his legs under them until they're crossed. His posture is fucking horrendous.

"Why?" asks Marlene again.

"I'm on the run," Regulus says.

Marlene snorts. "Come off it."

"As of three days ago."

"Sure."

"I escaped on the trip back to England," Regulus sighs.

"They have a boat."

“Escaping off a boat was the best you could come up with? The ocean, idiot.”

“I know. I jumped off a mile from the coast of Brittany and swam the rest of the way.”

“Christ alive.”

“It was cold,” he says lamely.

Marlene blinks a bit of grit out of her eyes, wiping her face against the shoulder of her jacket. “Cold,” she repeats.

Regulus nods, looking a bit pathetic. “I had to take one of the muggle trains. It was dirty.”

She kicks a bit of mud on him. “Not as dirty as you, friend.”

Regulus spits out a hunk of dirt, retching. “Thanks for that. I thought your lot were supposed to be kind?”

“My lot?”

He shrugs as if the motion will illuminate her.

Marlene snorts from her nose. She stands up and pockets her knife. “The petrol canisters are still at the bottom of the hill by the house,” she says. “They’ll probably blow up soon. We should go.”

“We?”

“If you don’t want to die. I’m fine with leaving you here, honestly.”

Regulus pushes himself to his feet, wobbling once he reaches them. Shoulders raised up to his ears, he shakes

his head. "I'll come with you. Never liked this place, anyway."

"And yet you lowered yourself to coming here."

"I don't want to die."

"Me neither. So we should go."

Regulus casts one last wistful glance past Marlene to the manor. He looks like he wants to change his mind but can't really build up the nerve.

Marlene looks over her shoulder, then turns fully just to watch the blaze climb higher against the dark evening. It must be past ten by now. Flame weeps across the high, stone walls, chipping away the pointing and the mortar. Heat ripples off the fire into the sky, blurring the clouds; it's warm against her skin, the blaze so hot it blows her choppy hair back off her face. The great mass of it seems to tremble under the weight of its own self-destruction.

There's movement beside her. Regulus wanders across the grass to stand a few feet to her left, and he watches the fire too. As Marlene looks at him, she thinks she sees some glimmer of her own hunger in him. He looks at the fire like he could eat it.

"Think I would've burned it if you didn't," he mutters.

"Then we've got a common enemy."

He glances askance at her. "Yeah. I suppose we have."

Marlene looks back at the fire. "Where's your brother?"

"No idea."

“Right.”

Regulus shrugs. “He never wrote to me.” He wraps his arms around his stomach. His nails pick at the skin of his hands, fingers twisted in on themselves.

“I see.”

“I know he’s gotten out. Of wherever they were keeping him.”

Marlene rubs the heel of her palm against her chin to get a spot of dirt off. “He’s on the run. Most wanted guy in magical Britain. People talk about him like he’s the chosen one now. Among the rebellion, I mean. You’ve missed a lot.”

“Wow. Well, they’re wrong.”

“I know that.”

Regulus laughs and it sounds like it’s come from somewhere deep in his thin neck. He digs the toe of his boot into the ground. “I need to find him.”

“Oh, fuck off.”

He raises a hand. “There’s some stuff that he knows about the Dark Lord that could help us win the war.”

“Us?” Marlene rolls her eyes. “And not you too. Honestly, just fuck off. Stay here, for all I care.”

She goes to stalk away. Regulus grabs her arm and pulls her to a stop.

“Hey,” he says sharply. “I’m not here to sing his praises. I just don’t want to die.”

“Good,” Marlene snaps. “I’ve had about enough of that. It’s a fucking war. There is no chosen one.”

“I know that as well as you do.”

“Then go find him on your own, and do whatever it is you need to do.”

Regulus’ fingernails chip and pull at his skin again, hard enough to bruise. He lets go of Marlene’s arm and his hands find each other at the centre of his chest. He gouges a long, red cut down the side of his thumbnail, chewing and gnawing on his lip so hard it looks like it’ll tear open.

“I don’t know where to go,” he says eventually. “I don’t know where he is.”

“That’s not my problem.”

“Who are you with?”

Marlene grinds her back teeth together. Her jaw has felt out of place for weeks now. The molars don’t sit correctly against each other anymore. “I’m alone.”

“Why?”

“Left my friends in Britain. They talked about Sirius Black too much,” she snipes.

“No, really.”

“Some shit happened to me,” she says shortly. Regulus watches her in silence. “When me and a friend were on the run from the death eaters. And I couldn’t fucking stay. Because I’m a... because I’m angry and I want to fuck up their stuff. Okay? Now leave me alone.”

She turns and starts off down the hill, away from the manor. Her shadow stretches long in front of her, shuddering across the grass with each heavy stride.

Regulus catches up with her a half mile down the road, by which point the sky is so dark it's almost black. "Wait," he calls.

Marlene doesn't turn around. "Piss off!"

"Wait!" he shouts again, louder this time. "Please!"

With a very heavy sigh, Marlene pulls to a halt. She turns to look back at him. Regulus is a black blur against the firelight far behind him, almost ablaze with it. The smoke lancing the sky behind him curls over him.

"Wait," he says once more, catching up. "Listen. Can I come with you?"

Marlene squints at him. "Go back home," she commands more than replies. "Your parents are probably worried about you."

"My father's dead," Regulus says, sounding lost. "And my mother's insane. And they're going to make me take the Mark."

"And you don't want that?"

His face tightens. "No," he says. Then, with less certainty, "I don't think so."

"How old are you?"

"Sixteen."

"Old enough to make decisions for yourself."

“Then no. I don’t want to.”

Marlene looks him up and down. The kid has blotchy blue hands and a subtle tremble to his frame, like he hasn’t fully dried off since he crawled on his knees out of the Atlantic ocean. She’d like to punch him in the face and knock him out, and scream at him, *you did this, you did this, I can fucking end you*. She’d like to take his knife and leave him here to burn like the house.

But she doesn’t.

“If you fuck this up, if you do anything to get in the way, I’ll kill you,” she warns.

“Get in the way of what?” Regulus asks.

Marlene tightens her jaw. “Me,” she says.

There’s a small magical community near the west side of Saint Paul de Vence, crushed into the greenery along the slope of the valley. It’s only a handful of houses, and the residents don’t tend to ward off muggles; they usually don’t stumble on them anyway. It’s about three miles from the Guthy-Parker manor house, and Marlene and Regulus walk most of the way in silence, along the deserted one-lane road leading towards the hilltop town, which sits against the sky on the horizon like some strange omen.

There are lots of things Marlene would like to say, but she holds herself back. They walk a fair distance from each other, Regulus not behind nor in front of her, but a few feet to the left, keeping pace even though his legs are shorter. The blue ocean peaks through the green hills to the south,

silver in the moonlight. It's almost full moon. Remus must be having a bad time, wherever he is.

"How did you end up out here, then?" Regulus asks.

"Oh, we're doing this, are we?" Marlene sighs.

"Yes. I think we should."

She shoots him a look. "I was on the run for a bit," she says shortly. "Stayed with some friends. Couldn't stick it. Left. I've been mostly in France since. You have no idea how many of these bastards live in France. Must be something in the water. Makes them all fucked up."

"So this is... a job?"

"I don't get paid."

"But it's what you do everyday."

"You're a prick everyday and I don't call it your job," Marlene points out.

"You haven't spoken to me enough to know that I'm a prick everyday."

"You haven't spoken to me enough to know that I commit arson everyday."

Regulus gestures to her petrol-stained hands. "You seem to know what you're doing."

Marlene shrugs, shoving them into her pockets. She tucks her knife into one fist, jabbing the blade out against the material until it strains, close to ripping. "Call it a temporary gig. In this economy, I can get away with it."

“There’s a war,” Regulus points out.

“And this is me fighting in it.”

He falls silent, seeming to chew on that for a while. “How many times?”

“Half a dozen. Less. They’ve started to blur.”

“With anyone inside?”

“I don’t check,” Marlene lies. She’s not killed anybody yet, she’s pretty sure of that. But Regulus doesn’t need to know that if it’ll keep him on his toes. This is Old War politics: biting the hand that feeds you. Quiet, implied violence.

He doesn’t reply for a while. The road gets steeper and by the time they reach a plateau, they’re both panting.

“So you just set their houses ablaze?” he wheezes.

Marlene puts her hands on her knees, huffing and pulling to a stop. “No,” she says.

Regulus seems to relax. He wipes his forehead with a hand which trembles violently on its way back down. “Here I was,” he says dryly. “Thinking that fire was you.”

“It’s not that simple,” Marlene supplements. “There’s no ‘just’ to it. I have to run a trail of petrol inside first and soak the flammables first. And not get caught. It’s been six months and I’ve only gotten it right like, five times. This stuff takes preparation.”

“It’s a wonder that you haven’t been killed yet.”

“Been on the run for long enough. I’m good at it.” She sniffs nonchalantly. “A year, now that it’s the end of July. Since

they took over the ministry, I mean. They came for my family. Had to leave to keep them alive. So yeah. Good at being on my own."

"Cept for when you stayed with other people."

And when I was with Mary. "The fear doesn't go away."

Regulus' face seems to change; by the stark, silver moonlight, his terror grows fangs. "Yeah."

Marlene chews on the flesh of the inside of her cheek until it goes ragged between her incisors. "It's only a little bit further."

Regulus squints off towards the town. "Don't lie."

"Shut up," Marlene sighs.

Looking a bit vindicated, Regulus follows her.

Mary,

Hot as it is in western Europe this time of year, it's still bloody freezing at night, so forgive me if my handwriting is a bit sloppy. I say that most of the time. Guess it doesn't help, does it? I hope it's mostly legible. I don't know. My wrist keeps twitching with it. I'm awful with the cold. This inn has walls like paper. You'd swear they could have charmed them warm. Maybe they expect us to do that ourselves. I hate the French. Even the magical ones who aren't blood purists are rude as anything.

Anyway, today went well, you'll be pleased to know. Well. I didn't really tell you what I was planning to do, did I? Anyway. There was nobody at Guthy-Parker manor when I

got there, and nobody there the whole time I set it up. By the time it was done, Regulus bloody Black had shown up, and I'm too tired to get into that mess with you, but I'm back at the inn. He's sleeping on the floor. He took one of my blankets. What a prick, right? I think he's going to try to run in the morning. Maybe with my money. As if I have any of that.

He doesn't know where his brother is, and good riddance. Quite frankly, I don't care. Sirius Black's probably been dead in some ditch somewhere for months now, and it's honestly better that way. Maybe then everybody can move on.

You said in your last letter you're going on missions now, with that lot. How's that going? I know you're only there on lookout and healing and stuff (the bit about you being bad at fighting isn't true; you're wonderful, but yeah, I'm glad you're not fighting too). Has James been taking care of you? I'll have strong words with him if he's been dragging you off on stupid, reckless jobs like he used to Lily, in the Padfoot's Army days. Hard to believe it was only March. You talk about it like it was years ago.

I've lost your last letter (I think I left it under the bus seat on the way down to the town I'm staying at today). I'm so sorry. I usually keep them but I was reading it. But anyway, you said Dorcas has been wanting to write to me too. I don't know when I'll have a stable mailing address next, but I swear the moment I do, you'll both be the first to know. Tell Dorcas I miss her. Crazy that she's only been away from Hogwarts for, what, five months now? And most of that has been staying with the Order, since you lot moved in at HQ. Bet she hasn't really had a chance to sit down and rest yet. Tell her to take care of herself.

I'm rambling. I always do that. So I'll end it here with this; I'm doing just fine. Please write back as soon as I'm able to let you know an address. Please don't worry about me. And don't tell James, okay? He'll get all weird about it. Far too noble for his own good. I know you tell me he's changed since I left, but I won't believe it until I see it.

Stay safe! Remember that I'm always thinking of you. And you're okay. I swear you're okay. And I don't know. I feel like a fucking nerve most days. So if I don't find my way back there for a while, just know that I tried.

~~*Sorry. There, I said it properly; no caveat. They drill it into you not to cross stuff out at Hogwarts, cos the parchment bleeds, so none of us do it much, from what I remember. You make mistakes and then live with them sitting there staring at you. But this isn't parchment, it's paper, and this isn't a quill, it's a rollerball, and so I guess I'm crossing this bit out. It's nice, right? Like a secret.*~~

- Marlene.

Regulus wakes from a nightmare at five in the morning, flailing his arms around like a maniac with his eyes blown as big as dinner plates in the darkness. He topples onto his feet and runs right into a wall.

"Shut it!" Marlene bellows at him, and buries her face into her pillow. "I want to fucking sleep!"

He doesn't seem to hear her, bouncing right off the wall and into the side of the dresser with his arms flying, elbows slamming into the wood. It rattles against the wall, wobbling with its legs lurching back and forth against the floor.

“Fuck!” he yells. “Where--”

Marlene throws her shoe at him. It smacks the back of his head and lands on the floor and Regulus whirls around to stare at her.

“We’re in France,” she supplies helpfully.

He reaches up to clutch at his chest, staring around wildly. “I thought-- I thought--”

“You thought?”

“I--”

“I don’t care,” Marlene says flatly. “Go back to sleep or leave.”

She rolls over, tucking her arms tightly around her stomach. Regulus’ stare burns on her back; Marlene feels him watching her in the dark for a long time. He’s probably got a whole lot of things he wants to say and the guts to say absolutely none of them. She wishes he would just grab his battered jacket and his stupid boots and go.

Regulus doesn’t go, though. What a shame. With a *whumph* sort of noise, he sits back down on the floor. Marlene hears him lie down and when she glances over, he’s curled up on his side again, very still under the fuzzy brown blanket, which she thinks she should probably steal before they leave. The owners will summon it back soon enough, but it might afford them a night of warmth out there before they notice.

Neither of them speaks again, though Marlene gets the impression Regulus doesn’t get back to sleep either. Blue dawn tracks its dim light over the far wall, streaking

through the curtains and making the whole room feel very cool-toned. Marlene watches her un-enveloped letter to Mary sitting on the bedside table as if waiting for it to grow legs and run off to Britain for her.

"You breathe funny," Regulus says into the quiet.

It's a bit lighter by that point. An hour after he woke up, maybe a bit more.

Marlene sits up in bed. "Cracked a rib a few months ago," she says.

"Did you?"

"No. I'm severely asmatic. It could kill me at any moment."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"I'm not actually super comfortable talking about it, if that's alright."

Regulus eyes her from under his blanket. "Really?"

"No," Marlene snorts. "I really did crack a rib."

He watches her as she stands up and crosses the room to the window. Marlene tries to ignore the feeling as she stares out into the gathering dawn. It was a few days after she got out of Britain, she remembers. Little magical community in Normandy. Pureblood freaks who chucked her into the dry reservoir first and asked questions never. All things considered, she got lucky to only crack one.

"How?" Regulus interrogates.

"I rolled down a big hill in a shopping trolley," she replies, curling both hands over the radiator to keep them warm.

Regulus squints at her; she watches it twist his face in the reflection of the dusty window. "Why?"

"Gotta make my own fun somehow, right?" Marlene spies a tail of smoke on the horizon. It must still be burning. She turns back to him, leaning against the radiator. "We should move on soon. This'll be the first place they look, once they realise the fire wasn't magical. They'll know we didn't apparate."

Regulus shuffles on his makeshift bed, legs tucked into a gap where the rug has lifted from the floor. "A bit longer?"

"If you want them to find you. Weren't they your relatives or something?"

"They don't stay there over the summer. They won't know for a while. Right? They've got wards up for blood contaminants," Regulus says. "Not fire."

"Someone'll tell them," Marlene replies. "The smoke shows for miles. Bet we could smell it from here."

"Don't open the window. It's cold."

"Take a shower."

"I bet they don't have hot water," Regulus mutters.

Marlene pretends like she's going to kick him on her way past. He flinches hard enough that it trembles the floorboards under his hands. She pretends not to notice. "I'll use it all, then."

He says nothing as she enters the bathroom. Marlene gets the impression, as she checks that the door is locked three times and then begins the process of covering every

centimetre of the window with a balled-up jacket, making sure it leaves not an inch of daylight to filter through, that this isn't going to be a very fun time.

There is indeed no hot water, it turns out. Regulus looks slightly mollified when he steps out of the bathroom after his own shower, even if just because he was right. More than he looks comforted, he looks like a drowned rat, bedraggled and still jittering like there's an electric storm in his ribcage.

They leave the hotel in silence. The wizard behind the grotty wooden front desk watches them leave and doesn't stop them. Marlene tries to take the lead and incessantly, as he did last night, Regulus walks beside her.

"You know," she says when they're halfway back down the valleyside, headed towards the ocean, which sits on the clear horizon like a bright strip of faith. "There's a railway station in the next town over. You can hop the turnstile and go anywhere."

Regulus doesn't answer. When Marlene looks over at him, he's staring with intent at the ground, like he'd like to burrow inside of it.

"They don't notice you if you're quick," she offers. "Walk like you're meant to be there. They won't bat an eye."

"I don't really know," Regulus says, slowly and with intent, "where to go."

"Huh."

He shrugs both shoulders jerkily. "I can't go back to my family. Or to Britain."

"Why not?"

"Why can't *you* go back to Britain?" he parries.

Marlene takes that loss. "Touché."

"All I really cared about was getting away from Durmstrang."

"I see."

"And now that I'm gone, all I really care about is not going back." He grinds his back teeth as if he's chewing tobacco. "I could try to find him."

"He won't know what to do with you. He's good as dead."

"I know that." Regulus shrugs. "He never came to get me. Never wrote me a letter."

"Well, I'm so fucking sorry."

He shrugs again, like he can't stop doing it. "I'll take a train," he says. "When we get there."

"Where?"

"Somewhere," he murmurs.

Marlene pulls out her lighter, flicking it open and shut a few times. A tender flame flurries in the breeze, hardly there. It scorches blue at the bottom and tapers into a wobbling cable of smoke at the top. She breathes in its smell.

“Well,” she says. “I’m going to Innsbruck. Austria. Little riverside shithole. Very colourful.”

“Colourful?”

“The houses. They paint them.”

Regulus looks a bit wistful. “I could go to Germany,” he says, mostly to himself. “Someone on the boat said there’s resistance fighters in Rostock. Building a sort of sanctuary.”

Mary talked about that in her last letter. As if a sanctuary is what any of them need, Marlene thought when she read it. What they need is a weapon. What they need is time. Resources. Beds. Graves.

“Would they take you?” she asks, a bit mean.

Regulus chews on that. “No,” he says eventually. “They’d treat me like you are.”

“What are you implying?”

“I’m implying that you don’t trust me.”

“Deductive.”

“Can you stop?” he snaps. He raises a hand and hovers it right over the flame of the lighter. It’s still trembling violently, blue under the fingernails. A breath rattles out of him that sounds like it hurts.

Marlene snatches her lighter back and snaps it shut. “Rostock it is, then?”

“Do you think my brother’s there?”

Mary would know if he was, and she would've told Marlene. If Sirius Black is anywhere in the world right now, it isn't the bloody Rostock Sanctuary, home to every benevolent bleeding-heart bastard in wizarding western Europe, Lily Evans chief among them.

But Marlene sort of wants to get this kid off her back, so she says, "Maybe."

Regulus nods. "Rostock," he exhales.

When they reach the next town over, which sits white and rusted against the seafront, they hover outside of the train station for a while. Marlene swears she can still smell smoke, thick and a bit tar-like on the air. She's sure she would still be able to see the great black pillar of it if they were only on higher ground. Regulus leans against the wall of the train station near a flower stand and kicks rocks at pigeons; they both eye up the station attendees standing outside the glass doors.

"Where are you targeting next?" Regulus asks.

"If I told you, I'd have to kill you," Marlene replies, and wiggles her fingers at him. "Going to lay low in Austria for a bit first. They followed me all the way to Fleury-les-Aubrais a few weeks ago."

"They?"

"There's a group of them onto me."

"If they were properly hunting you, they would've gotten you already," Regulus tells her, squinting in the morning sun.

Marlene jabs the toe of her boot into his shin. "They think like wizards. Not muggles. A handful of train trips and a few nights' stay at a hotel usually throws them off. But they're trailing me."

"How do you know?"

She raises her sleeve to show him the gnarly scar there. "They cornered me a month ago. I got sloppy. Usually, I can smell their magic. Bad magic. Smells like dry tar. But I wasn't careful enough."

"But you're still alive?"

"You should've seen the other guy."

Regulus stares at her. Then he barks out a laugh, and it's too loud for his small frame. It echoes against the white walls and rises like a peace dove.

"You're so in over your head," he says, like this is a hilarious development. "Oh, god. You're going to die out here. Look at you."

Marlene kicks him again, harder. "I've got things under control."

Regulus shakes his head, still laughing. He sounds mildly hysterical. "You're setting fire to strangers' houses with muggle petrol, staying in hotels and stealing money--"

"I don't steal money," hisses Marlene. She tries to inject some dignity into it. "Not unless I have to."

"Merlin." He rubs his eyes with his knuckles, digging in hard enough that it looks like it hurts. "I can still feel salt."

He presses one nostril closed with his finger and snorts. "In my nose. From the ocean."

"Should've spent longer in the shower."

"It won't help." He knuckles his eyes again, harder. "Don't think it'll ever go away."

Marlene stares off down the road towards the ocean. "We should go."

Regulus nods tiredly. "Okay," he says, sounding small again.

He follows her through the station. When Marlene climbs over the turnstile, he follows her, surprisingly nonchalant. An old woman shoots them a look, but nobody stops them as Marlene pulls Regulus up the steps and over the overhead walkway from platform one to platform four.

"Mine's coming this way," she says as they step out onto the concrete. "Austria-bound. Yours is on the other side. No, that way. Yeah, there."

Regulus nods stiffly. He crosses the platform away from her until he's perching right on the edge of the concrete on the other side, overlooking the tracks on platform five. His dark hair is longer than Marlene has ever seen it, though that's not saying much; it's scarcely longer than her own, which sits choppy just below her ears. They could be siblings, both dark-haired and looking a bit like they don't belong here. Marlene's darker than him, Nicaraguan on her dad's side where Regulus is pale and waifish, but from a distance, they could almost have looked like they're travelling together.

Sighing, Marlene sits on a bench overlooking her side of the tracks. She folds her arms and settles in for a long wait. It'll be a long journey.

She hears the rattle of Regulus' train to Germany over the tracks. One-change trip. Easy. The doors whistle open and Marlene doesn't turn around to wave him off; it doesn't feel appropriate. She hears the doors close and just like that, the train pulls away, chugging off out of the station and into the dusty sun.

Regulus sits down on the bench beside her.

"Not Rostock?" Marlene asks him, somehow not surprised at all.

"Not Rostock," he confirms quietly.

"Where, then?"

He looks at her sidelong. "There's a Russian proverb," he says.

"Oh, give me a break," snarls Marlene, tapping her foot until it feels like it's going to come loose from its hinge.

"It goes, *'where hangs the smoke of hate burns a fiercer fire called fear'*."

"How poetic."

"You are afraid, though," Regulus points out as if it's nothing.

Marlene stares from him to the ground, and then at the tracks. "So are you."

"It's a war."

"And this is me fighting in it," she says, more forcefully than before.

“Then let me come with you.”

“Why?” Marlene demands.

Regulus shrugs. “I’m out of options. They’ll find me in two days on my own.”

“Admitting that you’re weaker? A first.”

“You mistake me for my brother.” He watches her. “I don’t want to die.”

“Noble of you.”

“Neither do you.”

Marlene flinches. “You know what?” she says. “You help me with this shit. Help me find their houses. Help me set them on fire. And you can come. Deal?”

Regulus nods without a moment of hesitation. He turns to look at the tracks too. Neither of them speaks.

When the distant roar of an approaching train arrives, Marlene looks up. The northbound train curls around the corner at the far end of the tracks, beyond the edge of the small town, and streaks towards them. A silver speck of possibility.

“This is us,” she says. “Sure you don’t want to take another?”

Regulus stands up. “Yes,” he says, and when the train pulls to a halt in front of them, ruffling up their hair, he follows her aboard.

Marlene takes a window seat across from a small table. Regulus sits facing opposite her, looking backwards, south.

Her chair faces north. Austria-bound.

Silence finds its feet between them. He leans his head against the window. As the train pulls off again, Marlene watches his eyes flicker shut, sunlight casting the blue veins across his eyelids into stark relief as they push against the skin, translucent and strange.

"That proverb isn't real, you know," he murmurs, about half an hour from the coast. "The one about fire."

"Hmm?"

"It's from something I read once." Regulus opens his eyes and looks at her. "*A Fable For Our Times*. Philip Wylie."

"That's a muggle book."

"I had a rebellious phase." He plants his hands into his lap, fingernails still scraping at the flaking skin. There's a gash along the side of his thumb that's bleeding already, spots of it going tacky on the window, pale when the sun flashes past. "Wylie said it was an old Russian proverb, but he made it up. It wasn't a proverb at all. I remembered it."

"Hmm," Marlene hums. "About muggle war, that one, isn't it?"

"Nuclear testing and stuff."

"What a world."

Regulus eyes her. "Yeah," he says.

"If it means anything to you," Marlene offers, picking at a bit of peeling paint on the tabletop, "I knew it wasn't real, and I wasn't going to mention it. I'm Russian on my

mother's side and it doesn't sound like anything I've ever heard before"

He blinks. "You are?"

Marlene tips her head back and laughs. "No," she chortles. "You'll believe anything."

Mary,

"They are afraid. They would, today, keep secret a thousand things that, yesterday, they would have told one another freely. Freedom. Where is it now? We are driving it into limbo—their kind. To limbo."

Regulus has been spouting bits of his strange books at me all morning and all afternoon and we're still not in Innsbruck yet. That's what that was. Stupid, right? I don't know why I keep asking you stuff. Anyway, I haven't the foggiest what it all means, but I parry anyway, because it's not like I'm going to let the kid win at whatever mindgame he's trying to play. I'll play him right back and he'll lose and maybe then he'll leave me alone.

Haven't sent the last letter yet. I've got this strange feeling I'm running against time. I've got lots of strange feelings. Maybe that's why I let him come with me. Every good instinct left in me knows I should've left him at the train station and fucked off to Austria on my own. But unfortunately, I don't think I've got many of those left. So he's asleep on the window opposite me, and he'll come awake soon and start saying stuff to me that I don't want to hear. I should throw him out of the window. He's got these horrible blue veins showing on his cheeks now that I can see him in the light. It's creepy. He looks dead.

When I get to Austria, I'll send them. That's a promise. This one and the other. Together. Two for you! More than I've bucked up the courage to write in a while. He said I'm scared and I guess I am. Scared, I mean. I haven't even tried a letter to Dorcas yet. I don't know what she'd say to me. Does she blame me, Mary? We left and she stayed there. And what happened to us changed us, but I worry she's changed too, and nobody was there to see it. Tree in a forest and all that crap. God, look at me.

I'll try her next. There you go; I wrote it. James' famous delivery service shouldn't fail me. I still remember the PO box address like it's my mother's maiden name. And I hate that. It feels like I shouldn't. I have nightmares that begin and end in London. Nine-and-three-quarters swallows you whole and I leave.

This is getting morbid. And it's getting cold again, too; look at my handwriting jumping around all over the page! And Regulus will wake soon. I can see him twitching. Merlin, what am I doing? What am I doing? What am I doing?

~~*I suppose I should end it here, though I don't really want to. Another secret, because it might make you laugh: I carved your name into a tree last week. Out in the middle of nowhere off the road where people don't hike. I think it'll stay there for a while with nobody seeing it. That's nice, right? It'll stay after us. Or something.*~~

Anyway. Here's a quote for you: "Live! Live the wonderful life that is in you! Let nothing be lost upon you. Be always searching for new sensations. Be afraid of nothing."

- Marlene.

They step out of the Innsbruck train station and into the gathering night, Regulus too close to her side for comfort, and then Marlene smells it.

“Shit,” she says. “Oh, no.”

Regulus is already on it. He grabs her arm and then lets go like it’s burnt him. She understands the sentiment.

“Come on,” he murmurs. “They’re not far from here.”

“Don’t know how they found me,” Marlene growls, and stalks off down the pavement with Regulus hot on her heels. She doesn’t glance around, doesn’t run. That’ll give the game away; she understands the chase intimately by now, like it’s an old friend.

“Maybe you’re getting predictable?” Regulus mutters, a shadow at her side.

She elbows him. “Shut it. Come on.”

They streak down the street and through a cluster of shops, all lit up against the night, none of them open. There’s a bar at the end of the road which is loud and bright with patronage. Marlene considers it.

“In there?” she suggests.

Regulus stiffens. “Too many people,” he mumbles. “Come on.”

He nudges her down a sidestreet. Marlene shoves him off but doesn’t break stride; the alleyway is narrow and unlit. Stone cracks rhythmically under their feet as they walk, not speaking. The sky is a tiny sliver of dark blue above.

The black-tar smell gets stronger. They're being followed, Marlene knows, as vehemently as she's ever known anything. Someone enters the alleyway behind them. Neither of them turns around. In unison, they both speed up, emerging from the other side onto a broad street with bars along one side and the river dark along the other, lined with green trees which sit like clouds along its bank.

Mostly abandoned, the road is their best shot. Marlene chances a glance behind them; the alleyway is stuffed at its entrance with the looming shadows of three strangers, advancing. Too far away to hear their footsteps clearly. Heavyset men.

She snatches Regulus' wrist. "We run on my count," she murmurs. "Towards the docks. West."

"West?"

"Right."

Regulus nods, eyes darting. "Right."

"Three." Marlene looks over her shoulder again; they've advanced; they're twenty feet away. "One."

Regulus stumbles over his feet and yelps and then they're sprinting. Marlene hits the ground on her right foot and bounds off towards the treeline, beyond which the docks seem to rattle with tension in the oncoming descent. The balls of her feet slide inside her boots, ripping up the soles. There are shouts behind them; she runs harder, arms pumping, taking great cantering strides. Hiding is easy; running is easier. She's good at this.

Evidently, Regulus is too. He finds his feet and slips like a shadow to her side, streaking towards the trees. They dive

into the treeline as one. Branches whip Marlene's face. She hurtles over a tree root and between two high birches, arms out in front of her to keep the leaves out of her eyes. The land slants into a steep decline; one of them trips and the other falls over their foot, and then she and Regulus are tumbling down, down, down the embankment, half stumbling and half rolling through the brambles.

There are shouts and a flash of light up at the top of the copse, bright through the trees. Marlene finds her feet and tugs Regulus up and they run the rest of the way down the slope, emerging onto a quaint stone walkway overlooking the docks, which are yellow with seasalt along their walls, the water thick and grey.

"Come on!" Marlene hisses, and hauls Regulus to the railing, which they stick tight to as they sprint up the walkway. More light bursts behind them. Sparks scatter between the trees and set a patch of leaves alight with an audible hiss. Someone kicks them into the river and they spark and smoke, fizzling.

Marlene knows they have seconds until they're spotted, if that. The naked moonlight does nothing to hide them. There's a roaring in her ears like the lion of Regulus' name.

She thinks fast. With a burst of strength, she hurtles to the side, crushing Regulus against the railing. Their eyes catch each other in the darkness. Regulus' face is unlike his brother's, but his eyes are exactly the same.

Marlene grabs the top rail and vaults clean over it. She lets go and hangs in open air for a moment, hurtling into the grey abyss, which swallows her in a burst of freezing cold as she hits the water.

The world goes dark and blurry around her. Marlene blinks into the water, legs swinging under herself and kicking through the darkness below. She skulls her hands through it in front of her face. It's too dirty to see. She squeezes her eyes shut and holds her breath. The water crumples a few feet beside her; she feels the impact of it like a shockwave. Regulus' jacket brushes her ribs. He's under, too.

Light ripples across the surface of the water, high above behind the railing. They're searching for them. Marlene pries clawed hands through the mire, trying to shove herself down deeper. Something brushes her leg, death or a lashing of seaweed. Saltwater has gotten up her nose and it clogs in her sinuses and its cold fingers trail down the back of her throat and she's abruptly terrified she'll start gagging and retching bile into the cold river. This is New War politics: the taste of your own blood clogging your airways, hardening in the cold.

Marlene opens her eyes. Through the murk, that grey stare greets her. Regulus looks like a corpse, dark clothes awash around him, billowing against the waves. He looks suspended in time. This cold water, this salt and brimstone, it must feel like a burial place to him. He got lucky once -- but the ocean does not forget. Panic sets in. She heaves the front of her shins against the water, pushing down, down. The great birthing pressure of it feels like it'll break her ankles. There is a glint like gold somewhere near the bottom. A rippling fish ready to eat them if they drown here. Bodies float, but she thinks she's so full of rot and petrol that she'd sink and never stop sinking.

Overhead, the lights give way. The world up there goes dark; when she looks up, Marlene thinks for a moment that she can see her own reflection gaunt and ghostly against the underside of the waves, drawn blue and bloated like a

dead body. Her lungs hurtle against her ribs. Let us out, they seem to say, and so she kicks for the surface as the world gathers darkness into itself around the corners.

She breaks into the cold air. The railing above is empty, no hovering face of death looming low to greet her. Shouts ring out in the distance. Marlene kicks for the pier wall and finds it, scrabbling her blunt fingernails against the viscid seaweed.

Regulus fractures the surface a moment later. Like a suture, he froths and kicks through the water to her, grabbing Marlene's shoulder and then the wall, gasping for breath and choking up great lungfuls of water.

"It's cold," he heaves.

"Homenum--" Marlene stutters through clacking teeth. "Homenum revelio. Doesn't work through water. Not unless you do the wand movement right."

"How did you know they wouldn't?" Regulus asks.

She spits out a lungful of river water, the taste of it rust-wretched. "I didn't."

He stares at her through the gloom. Above, in the distance, the shouts get fainter and more distant. They've lost them. For now, anyway.

"They knew you'd be here," he says. "They'll find us again."

Marlene rubs a shaking hand through her hair, ramming it out of her face. "You can still go to Rostock."

"How did they find us this time? Tell me the truth!" Regulus treads water poorly. Every other breath sends him half

under again. He's almost sobbing with panic, and still sounds like he's trying to be stern.

"I don't know. Honestly," Marlene replies. Seaweed brushes her foot again, tethered to the seawall where it stretches far into the depths. She breathes an unconditional breath and lets it out. "I think there's more of them out there than we know. They're probably looking a lot of places for people like me. And people like you."

"I could disappear if I wanted to. So could you."

"No we couldn't."

Regulus sniffs hard, wiping a hand across his forehead. His hair is sticking to it, bedraggled and heavy. "Is it safe to get out? I don't like-- I don't like the water."

"Did you hear what I said? There's more of them out there than us. And more by the day." Marlene has the sudden urge to shake him. To shake him until he sinks back under again.

"*Lærer Karkaroff*." Regulus spits it through clattering jaws. "A professor at Durmstrang. He talks about the Dark Lord expanding. Told us that the Dark Lord wants to take Normandy next."

"He wants to take all of Europe. Like some sort of fucking supervillain."

Regulus bobs under the water again and flails, rising and spitting out another mouthful of dirty water. "It won't be long now," he hacks out. "He told us so."

"A maniacal follower? Drives them mad, it does. He'll have been just as mad as the rest."

He shakes his head. "Smart," he says. "He's smart."

"...Then we should steer clear of France."

Regulus nods. "They'll come back for us soon. I don't want to go back under."

Marlene shoves him. He loses his grip on the wall and goes under. One of his kicking legs slams into her knee with a branding pain, hot and dislodging.

"Fuck you," he gasps as he splits the surface.

Marlene shakes out her knee to work the quivering pain from it. "Come on," she snaps. "We have to swim to the boardwalk."

"I'd rather drown," Regulus says.

"That's an option."

Regulus pulls a shred of bulbous black seaweed from his hair. Its tail sits like dark blood across his palm and he drops it beneath the waves as if it'll find its family down at the bottom again. He watches it sink.

"Okay," he whispers. When Marlene begins to swim, he follows her into the dark water, into the black night.

That night, they make base camp in the ladies' bathroom of a bus station on the edge of Innsbruck city centre. Regulus doesn't get a second glance as he follows Marlene in. There isn't anyone around to give him one. The bus station is dark, only the emergency lights on, aside from the automatic

overheads which flicker weakly to life as they pass and then go dark again.

“I’ve got a few spare clothes,” Marlene says, rifling through her backpack. “You’re lucky this is waterproof.”

“Waterproof?”

She pulls out the plastic bin liner inside. “Might be a bit big for you,” she says, as she rifles through it and pulls out a heavy maroon jumper, throwing it to Regulus along with a pair of dark denim jeans.

“It’s fine,” Regulus mutters. He hugs the clothes tight, still dripping a bit, and shuffles into one of the stalls.

Marlene follows his lead. She changes meticulously, pausing every few seconds to listen and make sure he’s not left his own stall. Dark trousers stolen from a muggle charity shop in Dublin, last year when things were worse but simpler. The heat of August had made them stick and chafe. Now, they’re not warm enough. She pulls on a heavy mint-green turtleneck over a dry bra, shoving the wet clothes into a ball under her arm and stepping out into the bathroom again.

Regulus shuffles out of his own stall in her wake. In her clothes, he looks like he doesn’t quite know what to do with his limbs. His hair drips dark stains around the neckline.

“Here,” he mumbles, pushing his wet clothes onto Marlene.

She takes them and unfolds the baby changing table from the wall to lay them out on. Hopefully they’ll dry a bit. “We can sleep on one of the benches out in the hallway.”

“Will nobody find us?”

“What will the muggles do? They’re soft on teenagers. Not like wizards are. They’ll just ask us to leave. And it’ll be a few hours ‘til anybody’s here.”

Looking dubious, Regulus nods once. He hugs his stomach very tightly. Marlene catches him scraping a thumbnail up and down on the bone-white flesh of his ring finger. Up, down. Up, down, like he’s trying to scrape himself away.

“Okay,” he says, and watches her as she lays their clothes out to catch the cold draught from under the door.

Marlene pauses on her wet trousers. She fishes around in the pockets and pulls out her lighter; when she flicks it open, it comes alive with fire. Its heat feels loyal in her hand.

But the letters are sodden, cracked along the middle with water. The black ink has run and they’re unreadable, in pieces which stick under her fingernails as she pries them from the denim.

“Shit,” Marlene says.

“What were those?” Regulus asks.

She chucks the pupa-ish mess into the sink. “Nothing. Gone now. I’ll write more.”

As if sensing he won’t get more than that, Regulus nods. When Marlene is done, he follows her out of the bathroom and into the hallway. Marlene takes one bench, jacket wrapped into a ball under her head, and he takes the other. They lie in silence.

After a while, the automatic lights flicker off again.

“Goodnight,” Remus murmurs into the quiet.

Marlene rolls over, not gracing him with an answer. Outside, the night remains silent. When she closes her eyes she sees the cold, clinging embrace of seaweed hands, burbling saltwater aqueducts leading heavy towards black reservoirs. Grey hoarfrost on tired blades of grass. Choking in the mud.

Mary,

So I wrote to you and the letters got destroyed. Do you believe that? I don't think you do. I can see you shaking your head now.

~~*I'm sorry*~~

~~*I want to see you*~~

~~*Come visit?*~~

~~*Anyway*~~

“We should hit Hénin-Liétard manor next,” Regulus says.

Marlene looks up from her shitty brown Trzesniewski coffee. “What?”

“It’s northeast of here. On the German border.” Regulus pokes his croissant around on his plate, getting bits of flaky pastry stuck under his fingernail. “In Kufstein. A wealthy area.”

“Who lives there?”

“Isaïe and Bethsabée Hénin-Liétard.”

"If this is a joke to try to get me to pronounce that, it's not funny."

Regulus rolls his eyes. He still looks blue from their foray into the river last night. "They're donors," he says. "To the death eaters. My family knows them."

"They got kids?"

"Three."

"Then we'll have to be careful."

Regulus eyes her. "Yes," he says.

Marlene leans back in her seat. "Security?"

"Rich enough for elves. Not rich enough for guards."

"Noted."

"They're isolated. Divided by a river from the town."

Marlene chews on that information. "We'll need petrol and a place to lay low afterwards. And we'll need to be careful. Isn't that city big?"

"As big as cities in Austria get on this end of the war."

"Don't quote Wylie on me again."

"Limbo," Regulus replies, and bites the end off his croissant. "This limbo."

"We'll take the train up in a few days."

"Don't you want to get out of Innsbruck?"

Marlene shakes her head. She tosses her head back to get the hair out of her face, casting a glance around the bus station as she does. They barely had enough francs to pay for food. And they don't have any Austrian schillings.

"They're watching the train station, probably. They know we came from there." She heels her hand against the underside of her nose. "Give it a few days and we can give them the slip. Climb the fence onto the tracks in the night and sleep in one of the bathrooms on the platform."

"You talk like you've done this before."

"Common sense."

"Never wanted something 'common' before," remarks Regulus. He finishes the croissant and pulls on a pimple on his chin until it bleeds, not seeming to realise that he's doing it.

Marlene chugs the rest of her coffee. It scalds her throat on the way down. "It's *Direct Action* night tonight," she says. "We'll have to find someplace where I can set up the radio. Under a bridge somewhere. Someplace muggles won't stumble on us."

"Makes you wish for a notice-me-not charm."

She watches him for a moment. "You lost your wand, didn't you?"

"I was going to steal yours," Regulus admits. "But you don't have yours either, do you?"

"Left it in Britain. Didn't want it anymore."

"Mine," Regulus says tremulously, "is at the bottom of the ocean by now."

"Then we're both pretty skint."

He nods. "Suppose we are."

Marlene glances out of the glass doors, onto the sunlit street. "House rivalries really did fall away when it mattered. It's touching, honestly."

Regulus kicks her under the table and just as quickly, he withdraws his foot. "I think I need a cough potion. Or the muggle equivalent. I'm getting a cold."

"Not the worst thing that can happen out here." Marlene's rib twinges, as if to remind her that it's still there, still hurting. "I'll try to find you something."

He nods. "You had a nightmare last night," he says, more invitation than accusation.

Marlene laughs. "Your nose got all snotty when you were in the river," she explains. "It grossed me out so much it stayed with me. I can't get the horrific sight of it out of my head. Running over your lips and shit--"

Regulus kicks her again, harder. She kicks him right back. Their feet scrabble and scrap against each other under the table. It's funny and neither of them laughs at it.

"What do they talk about?" he asks.

"Hmm?"

"On *Direct Action*."

“It’s changed over the past few months,” Marlene offers. She stops kicking. Her body wants to hit something; it begs her for violence; she cannot tame it. “Since Little Hangleton. It’s mostly miserable now. One of the hosts died in that fight. Can’t remember much one. Since then, it’s been a morbid affair.”

“Little Hangleton?”

“Big tiff back in England between the Death Eaters and the Order of the Phoenix. March, early April, maybe? I think.” She glances at him. “A lot of people died.”

“They don’t tell us about that stuff in Durmstrang.”

“Then you’ll just have to wait ‘til tonight to hear it.”

Regulus nods. “I guess I will.” He looks up at her and doesn’t look away. “Do you think it’ll be bad news?”

Marlene draws a long breath and lets it out through her nose. “It’s always bad news,” she replies. “Let’s just hope it’s not any names we recognise on the deathlist this week. And next week, we can do the same thing all over again.”

Regulus nods. He looks from Marlene to his hands. He picks at the peeling skin under his thumbnail until he can rip it back. Pink flesh shines beneath. Buried treasure.

“Yeah,” he agrees. “Okay.”

Chapter End Notes

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KETTERING

Chapter Notes

not ENTIRELY happy w/ this one but i think it's as good as it's going to get aye? absolutely whiffed my head on the doorframe on my way into the kitchen to get my laptop to publish the chapter. owie. send healing vibes besties!

warnings: injury, blood, violence, dark themes

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Reparo,” James is saying. “Reparo. Reparo. Reparo. Reparo... reparo.”

Dorcas is still asleep, snoring lightly. Mary lies still and tries to keep her breathing even.

“Reparo,” he murmurs again, some desperation to it. Most nights end up like this.

The bedroom door slams open.

Still lying down, Mary flinches so hard it feels like it has restarted her heart. James goes deadly still; in the dark, she sees his wand rise.

“The Death Eaters have taken Cecil Court,” McGonagall’s severe voice says into the blackness. “Up and downstairs. All of you. Now.”

Dorcas launches out of bed, half dressed in a matter of seconds. James rolls off his mattress and onto the floor and

smacks his head on the leg of the wardrobe. Mary sits up, yawns, and considers going back to sleep.

Someone turns the light on. McGonagall is gone already, off to wake more people. The pieces of that broken mirror sit on James' covers beside his wand, unfixed. They're all bleary-eyed and ruffled.

"Christ," James says, rubbing the red mark in the middle of his forehead. "Christ alive. We're fighting?"

"Knew it was only a matter of time," Dorcas mutters, pulling on her jacket. "I knew it. I said it! Just the other day, in the meeting! Come on. Up. Both of you."

"Me too?" Mary asks, swinging her legs off the side of the bed.

"You too," Dorcas replies, offering her a hand to pull her to her feet. "They'll need all of us. I put your favourite jumper on the radiator in the hallway. It should be dry."

"What time is it?" James asks, hauling himself up against the cabinet.

"Two," Mary replies, glancing at the clock on the wall. "And thanks, Dorcas." She squeezes her hand and then lets go.

James starts pulling on boots, stamping them onto his feet against the rug. "Cecil Court's a weird place to start, isn't it? Would've thought they would expand out from Whitehall."

Mary steps out of their bedroom (which isn't really a bedroom; it's an airing cupboard with three mattresses crammed inside) and grabs her jumper off the radiator. It's her favourite mostly because it used to be Marlene's. She

left it behind when she left Mary behind, too, and so Mary feels a kinship with the old thing, feels like she would enjoy wrapping herself in its dark grey wool, the tag all scratchy, and never leaving.

“That would be stupid,” Dorcas contends. Mary steps back inside and clambers past James to the dresser to grab a pair of socks.

“Stupid how?” James asks.

“If they expanded into Whitehall, all they’d have to gain would be the muggle industrial uptown high-rises. They don’t care for muggle economics any more than they care about violating muggle laws. Doesn’t matter to them.”

“And taking a pedestrian street on the other side of the Thames without any power to it at all does?”

“It’s a tourist destination. This is taking something from the muggles, they think. And they get to control the entrance to Diagon, too.”

James shakes his head. “It doesn’t make any sense—”

“Did you use a new detergent?” Mary interrupts, looking over at Dorcas.

Dorcas grins. “Only the best for you.”

She feels her face heat. “It’s lovely. Thank you.”

James makes a very pained sound and says, “I’m going to brush my teeth.”

“It’s the middle of the night!” Dorcas calls after him. He ignores her.

“Do you think he’s okay to come?” Mary asks, chewing her lip. She pulls her trainers on and clambers over the mattress to Dorcas’ side. “He’s in a bad mood.”

“He’s always in a bad mood.”

“Even more than usual, then.”

Dorcas loops an arm around Mary, hugging her close around the neck. Mary buries the top of her head in the prickly juncture of Dorcas’ neck. They stand there for a moment, swaying on the rickety floor. There’s something very tunless to this place. It has made all of them static.

“You shouldn’t worry about him,” Dorcas murmurs. “Jim’s only such a miserable git because he misses... because he misses...”

She trails off. Mary doesn’t know what she was going to say: Remus? Lily? Sirius? Maybe Dorcas doesn’t know either.

“I know,” she replies. “Come on. I think we should brush our teeth too.”

“You’re a maniac. We’ve only been asleep three hours!”

Mary tugs on her hand. “And we won’t be getting back to sleep anytime soon.”

By the time the three of them make it down the stairs, rumpled and rubbing tired eyes, most of the Order’s skeleton crew have gathered in the dining room, around a long table. 203 Hackney Terrace buzzes with tension. The dust-spotted windows yield no view into the dark night; regardless, Mary swears she can hear violence on the air, can almost taste it. London’s got bad vibrations as of late, like it’s going to shake apart with them.

Now that it's past midnight, it's four months to the day since Little Hangleton. None of them have mentioned it and Mary hopes the date goes unacknowledged, because if the topic of that night rises between them, it'll curl its claws into them and make Dorcas tight and anxious, and James angry and snappish, and those things in combination will make Mary want to find a hole to bury herself in.

Moody looks up as the three of them walk in. "Took our time, did we?" he grunts, not waiting for an answer. "The fight's not over yet. Sit, all of you."

"When did it start?" Dorcas asks, pulling back a chair for Mary with a screech and then taking her own.

"Half an hour ago. Muggle police have already been called off. We've got Shacklebolt dealing with their authorities."

"Without magic?" James asks.

Moody's gaze swings to him. "Called in a handful of foreign insurgents to help deal with the fallout."

"You lot never ask for help. That's an improvement," Dorcas mutters.

Moody ignores her. "As far as we can tell, they set up the raid a few weeks ago. We've already got Order members fighting on the ground. You three aren't going to be in the thick of it—"

Dorcas and James both bristle, beginning to protest.

"Shut it, both of you," Moody interrupts, looking too tired to be snappish. "Let me finish. You're not going to be in the thick of it because I need the lot of you up here." He points to a spot on the north-east of his map, shoving it at them.

James squints. "The London museum?"

"The car park outside. That is their apparition point." McGonagall appears over Moody's shoulder, looking extraordinarily hassled. She's got floor soot on her cheeks and her hair is half out of its pristine bun, curls of greying black tumbling down around her shoulders. She throws something onto the table.

Dorcas picks it up; it's a handful of scraps of Linen, the thin material pale and a bit grubby. There are markings inked into them.

"Runes," Mary supplies. She looks up at McGonagall. "What for?"

"Anti-apparition," McGonagall replies promptly. "Lay them around the outside of the area, weighed down by stones. Then, report back immediately. No detours. We'll need you all here to receive the injured."

"So we're not fighting," James says, sounding very irritated by that.

"Not unless they initiate combat, no, Potter. And since you've still got the Trace on you, I would take that to be quite a privilege," McGonagall tells him coolly.

James' hand tightens in his lap, balling into a strained-knuckle fist against his knee. He says nothing.

"Ensuring the apparition point is barred will buy us time," Dearborn says from near the door. He's got blood pouring from a cut at his hairline, which he swipes his wand at to suture closed in the same movement as he kicks the door closed behind him. He's panting and he smells of death. "And we need time."

“They’re calling in more fighters by the minute. They’ll still be able to apparate out,” McGonagall nods, offering Dearborn a handkerchief to wipe the blood out of his eyes. “But they’ll have to apparate directly into Diagon Alley, which is... by our approximation, it’s already burning.”

“Burning?!” James exclaims.

Mary chews her lip. “Burning,” she echoes softly. “They’re not expanding, they’re... relocating.”

“Out with the old,” McGonagall says, and wipes a patch of soot off her forehead with the back of a shaking hand. “And in with the new, Miss Macdonald. Such is the way of the New War.”

“We can do this,” Dorcas puts in, half-standing. “It’s easy. We’ll be back in an hour, if that.”

“The trains aren’t running,” Mary offers lamely.

“We can run,” James grunts.

“I’m asthmatic,” she tries.

Dorcas grabs her hand. “If you want to stay here—”

“No,” Mary says immediately. She takes a deep breath and tries to pull herself together. “No, I... we can do this. Come on. Let’s get out of here.”

They all stand up. James has already got his bat strapped to the back of his jacket. *PA + RL* the back reads. Padfoot’s Army and Remus Lupin. Two dead things, stuck to him like brands. He stalks out of the room and Dorcas follows, fingers twitching at her sides like she wants to put a knife in

them, and Mary follows her, as she thinks she would like to do for the rest of her days.

Outside, the night air is very cold, and it bites at Mary's face fiercely as she piles out of the door after James. Dorcas closes it behind her and the three of them jog down the steps and onto the street, James up in front. He hasn't let his hair grow out very long since Little Hangleton, and right now it's about as long as it ever gets, its scant centimetre or two sticking up on the top. He'll shave it all down again soon, probably when Dorcas does the same. Mary's been trying to let hers grow out, but type four hair seems to grow tenuously slowly, bunched tight to the scalp, worse when it's hotter and it seems to shrink in upon itself. Her mother had the same hair type, dimpled and cloudy like Mary's, and it took her all her life to grow it out far enough that it settled past her armpits in a coarse, dark nebula.

"You're not really asthmatic, are you?" James calls over his shoulder, as he strides off down the abandoned pavement. This part of North London usually has some nightlife, but the streets are deserted. Maybe the muggles sense that something is wrong.

"No," Mary admits. "I just don't like to run."

"We'll take it slow if you need a break," Dorcas tells her gently.

James glances over his shoulder at them both, seeming to want to say something, then deciding against it.

Mary speeds up to reach his side. Dorcas takes his other. "How far is the London Museum?"

"Half an hour's walk, if we're quick."

"You know us," Dorcas says. "Good runners."

"Yeah, well, I would've needed convincing after last week's job," James snipes.

"That was your fault—" Dorcas starts.

Mary reaches across to grab her arm. She shakes her head quickly, trying to convey through her stare that they can't do this again, not tonight.

James huffs. "Shut it. Let's not."

Dorcas nods, looking murderous. "Let's not," she agrees.

"Have you sorted through yesterday's haul of letters yet?" Mary asks James tentatively, as they turn the corner of Hackney Terrace onto the main road, leading down towards central London.

"No," James says shortly. "I'm behind."

"You should fix that," Dorcas replies blithely.

He glares at her. "I'm working on it. Unfortunately, three people's jobs falling to one isn't a very good, fucking, fucking, business model. Or whatever."

"Then let us help," Mary consoles. "We could—"

James shakes his head. "It's my job," he sighs. "I can do it myself."

Dorcas shrugs like she's trying to dislodge some bad thought. "Fine."

"Fine," Mary mumbles, and says nothing else. Being around James and Dorcas when things are like this is a bit like

being an electron. Buzzing around two opposite charges who can't stop clashing.

They don't enter Cecil Court, which sits just off Charing Cross Road. They don't even come close enough to see it. They can all smell it, though; there's a thick, tangy, burnt smell like soy sauce stuck to the bottom of the pan. Bad magic; killing magic. Smoke, too, like a woodfire. Electrical and crackling on the night wind. The air feels stripped like an earth wire.

"Museum's a bit farther," James mutters, pulling them into the shadow of a record shop's awning and peering up and down the street. "Let's take the long way around. In case they've got anybody staked out on Charing. Turning's only up there. Bit further, now."

Dorcas nods. She takes the lead from him, darting up the street through the heavy shadow cover. They're all in dark clothes, but she takes to solitude better than any of them, and as Mary follows James after her, she can barely see her up ahead. The sky is bright with the silver of an almost-full moon, approaching or maybe a bit after it, Mary doesn't keep track. Moonlight cannot stop any of them, though; if James was ever beholden to it, that time is long gone.

"The muggles must know something's up," Mary whispers to James, sticking tight to his side. "Look. All the lights in the apartments are off."

James nods, not looking around. "I know," he murmurs. "Do you hear it?"

Mary listens, straining her ears; only then does she catch it. A faint, distant buzzing, like a socket not all the way into a

plug.

"Magic," she murmurs. "They must be..."

"Killing curses sound like that," James mutters. "They have that frequency."

Mary opens her mouth to ask how he knows that and then wisely decides against it.

Ahead, Dorcas crouches low at the turning onto St. Martin's Lane, a broad dual carriageway along which the London Museum sits. James and Mary reach her, crouching along the wall behind her. They all listen intently.

Now that she's heard it, she can't stop. It's like when you catch onto the sound of a clock ticking, Mary thinks. You notice it and then it doesn't go away. The lilting ring of magic on the air, faint and always with the feeling of drawing closer. Undulating like an air raid siren.

"So long as we go slowly," Dorcas whispers. "We should be okay."

James fishes in the pocket of his leather jacket and pulls out the scraps of rune fabric. He hands them to Dorcas. "I'll take guard," he says. "You lay them out."

Dorcas nods. "Mary, you take James' back. Watch his blind spot."

"I don't have a blind spot," James says, annoyed.

Dorcas rolls her eyes; Mary can't see it, but she knows she has. "Didn't know you had eyes in the back of your head."

James grumbles but doesn't protest anymore.

In the night, there's a faint scream, very far away. Smoke is rising against the orange night now. Mary can see it atop the buildings, underlit by the glow of distant, flickering flames.

"We're running out of time," she murmurs.

James and Dorcas stand up. Mary echoes them. As one, the three of them draw a breath and take the turning onto St. Martin's Lane.

The street is deserted. There are a handful of cars parked along either side of the road, but they're all dark and unmoving, black husks in the dappled shadows. All of the storefronts are dark, and no emergency lights shine inside their hanging entrances. The power must be out.

The smell of smoke is stronger here, wind whipping through the concrete, carrying it east. Dorcas folds herself into the shadows along the east side of the street; she might as well be creeping the halls of Hogwarts again for how easily her silence falls. She sticks to the shopfronts, tight against the glass, so close to it that her mirror's face is clear as a bell as it ripples along beside her. James sticks close behind her. He swings his bat off his back and holds it tight in both hands, at an angle at his side, ready to attack.

Ahead, the London Museum looms large over the road, cut clean of the rest of the shopfronts and buildings; it's surrounded by a huge swathe of greenery across the front, lying in bright, thick strips which shine with moonlight and dew. The building itself is styled like something ancient, great stone pillars holding the chiselled roof aloft, shadows lying long under it. The car park is small, sitting just in front of the left wing of the museum. It looks deserted.

"We have to move quickly," Dorcas says. "C'mon. We've got an opening."

James nods. Dorcas picks up her pace to a jog. She clatters over an iron drainpipe and doesn't slow, but her head swivels around, shoulders jumping.

Nobody stops them. Mary's racing heart throws itself against her ribs. Smack, smack, smack. It almost hurts with its ferocity.

"Wait," James grunts. He slows and stops, grabbing at the wall of a tourist joint with one hand and at his chest with another. He pounds his fist against his sternum, face screwed up tight with pain, eyes squeezing shut.

Dorcas slows up ahead, turning on her heel to look back. "That's still bothering you?"

"I told you, it didn't heal right." He audibly bites the flesh of his cheeks between his molars, grinding it there.

"Hey..." Mary hovers a hand over his shoulder. "You can stay here, if you want...?"

James shakes his head. He pounds at his chest again. By the light of the polluted sky and the heavy white moon, the distended ridge of his not-quite-unbroken manubrium strains against the fabric of his shirt. He wheezes in a pained breath and it rattles around in there like it doesn't know where to go.

"I'll be okay," he groans. "Just give me a second."

"You should have one of the healers look at it—"

"I said I'm fine!"

Mary skitters away to Dorcas' stoic side. They watch in silence as James digs brown fingers through the fabric of his shirt like he's trying to straighten the bones in there himself. Little Hangleton took a lot from all of them — it decisively ended the affability of the Old War, it took Lyric and Fenwick and Vance, it sent Remus to Wales and Lily to Germany and Sirius far away again, none of them seen on English soil since. Mary often gets the impression that the lingering pain of a snapped-open sternum is one of the less painful things that night left James with.

"Come on," Dorcas says after a few seconds. "We're too exposed out here. Keep going or go back."

James punches at his chest one last time and then jogs the rest of the way to them. He looks grey with pain.

"Let's go," he grunts.

They run the rest of the way to the museum in silence, curtained by shadow and not looking at one another. The awful smell grows stronger and Mary thinks she might throw up if they get any closer to it. She thinks of Marlene, inexplicably. If Marlene was here, she would have already run in the other direction. Maybe Mary should consider doing the same.

But it's too late for that now, and Dorcas' silent form dark ahead of her spurs Mary on. She needs to be brave. Brave like James and Dorcas and Lily.

As a unit, the three of them clamber onto one of the long strips of dark grass. They're out in the open now, broken free from the constraints of the shadows.

"Stay down," Dorcas mutters. She takes Mary's hand, squeezes it, and then lets it go.

Mary ducks low to the ground. Behind James, she starts to run; they streak as a united shadow across the green, towards the towering pillars ahead. The car park looms, still empty. Nobody's around.

James laughs, a bit manic. "Oh Merlin," he murmurs. "Jackpot."

"Don't let your guard down yet," Dorcas snaps.

"I know that!"

Mary watches his grip get tighter on the bat. They are playing for keeps, all of them. Every shadow looks like a dark hand.

Dorcas is the first to jump down from the grassy null and onto the concrete of the pavement. She stumbles, rangey and cautious, a few steps onto the flat plane of concrete, each footstep as loud as gunfire in the quiet. Mary watches her fingers twitch.

Nothing out there moves. "I think we're safe."

James jumps down too, with only a small noise of pain. He takes the bat in one hand and spins it in quick circles at his side, wrist clicking. "Go," he says. "Quickly."

Dorcas sets off jogging around the periphery. She digs a hand into her pocket and pulls out the runes and a handful of pebbles, which clatter as she notches them in a tight fist. One by one, she stoops to lay them around the outside, on the line of white paint the muggles used to mark the boundary of this place. She works quickly and without particular flourish. The only sign of her fear is the way her shuffling feet dart under her in a strange half-dance, never

pausing in their skittering even when she halts to put down a rune.

Mary crouches on the ledge of the eminence, elbows on her knees. The dark ground winks at her below, too far for comfort. She feels displaced from herself, like a light gust of wind could topple her. James paces in a long circle around the car park, glaring at every twitching shadow. A fox darts across the shadowy front steps of the museum, yapping pragmatically. It makes them all jump.

"This doesn't feel right," James mutters. "Someone should have apparated in by now. They were calling extra forces, McGonagall said."

"Maybe they ran out," Mary offers, glancing around. With her arms curled forwards her back feels too open. Like someone might put a knife in it.

"Only so many wizards in Britain, I suppose," James agrees, looking like he doesn't believe it. His free hand comes up to palm at his chest again.

"You really should talk to someone about that."

He waves her off. "I've survived this long. Four months and I'm still kicking, aren't I? And four more and it might be over."

It's a white lie. Mary's good at telling when people are lying (she was friends with Marlene for years), but this one doesn't even take any effort to discern. "Yeah," she says anyway. "Maybe."

James whips the bat in a great arc at his side, almost smashing it against his own knee. He looks like he almost wants someone to turn up just so he can pick this fight he's

itching for. His wrist keeps clicking on every spin, louder and faster.

Across the car park, Dorcas is half done already. Maybe they really will make it through this without having to get hurt. Hope is a fickle dove in these times, never lingering long enough to roost. But she's here now, in central London in the thick soy sauce smell and the crackle of an electric storm. Mary can hear her.

Something moves on the roof of the museum. James spins around, brandishing his bat, but it's just a bird, taking flight from her straw drainpipe nest into the dark sky. She rises high against the clouds, elliptical wings broad and black. Mary watches her until she disappears, heading north.

The smell of smoke has gotten stronger; the fire is spreading.

Mary jumps down from the ledge and creeps to James' side. "I've got the bad feeling," she mutters. "It's hit me now."

James glances at her. They're the same height, but he always manages to feel taller. "Yeah?"

"I don't want to freak her out."

He nods. "A little longer. Then we can run for it."

"Can you handle it? You're in pain."

He glances sidelong at her. "I think there's no healing it," he murmurs. "Between you and me."

"Oh."

"It was a stray curse. In the middle of that fight." James huffs a breath through his nose. "I spent hours walking around and fighting and... and stuff. Before someone sat me down and healed me. They think I messed something up somewhere in there that can't be fixed."

"I'm sorry," Marlene whispers, putting a hand on his arm.

He nods. "Me too." And then he shrugs. "Things can't be the same anymore. People kept telling me that. And I guess I believe them now. Feels like one of these days this—" James points to his own chest. "It'll just collapse. I guess that's the sort of thing we live with."

"You shouldn't have to."

Across the concrete, Dorcas staggers to a stop, hands on her knees. Her breathing is so ragged that Mary can hear it from here. Then, she straightens and starts off again.

James steps away, hand on his bat. "We'll be back soon. Just wait a bit longer."

Mary nods. "Yeah," she agrees. "You too."

He casts her a strange, interrogating look. Mary watches his lips part as if he's going to say something.

Across the car park, Dorcas slows to a stop again, stumbling a few steps and then standing still, staring around. Mary looks over at her, meeting her stare across the concrete. They stand still like that for a second that feels like years.

Mary raises her chin and breathes in long through her nose. Black tar, soy sauce, burnt-edged paper.

Something fizzles on the wind.

"Finish it," Mary says. She raises her voice to scream it.
"Finish it!"

Dorcas tears off down the concrete like a bat out of hell, throwing runes down like small prayers. James crashes his spinning bat to a halt in front of him, gripping it tight at the chipped blue paint taper, and spins in a wide circle, feet scuffing the ground, eyes very wild. The smell gets stronger. The sound of magic is audible now, fizzing and retching in the air.

"They're coming," Mary murmurs to herself. Without her consent, her hands rise to hug at her arms, fingernails digging in above her elbows. "They're coming."

James grabs her tight around the shoulders; the ridged end of the bat digs cold and hard into her arm, pressed in by his hand. "You're okay. I promise. Don't freak out, okay? We're dead if we freak out."

Mary swallows hard, trying to meet his eyes as her vision spots and blurs. "I can't breathe," she says.

James starts saying something — and even months later, she won't be able to figure out what. The crack of apparition drowns him out.

Three dark-robed figures appear in a black tailspin in the centre of the incomplete rune circle. They separate from each other, and for a merciful moment, they don't seem to notice that they're not alone, their shadowy forms cutting across the concrete as they start towards the road. Then they pull a stop. James steps in front of Mary, bat in hand.

He must shout something. Mary can't hear it over the roar of panic in her ears.

The death eater at the front raises his chin. His white mask flinches with light. Then, he raises his wand and the concrete under their feet cracks open.

Mary screams, diving out of the way and slamming hard into the ground on her side. She crawls on her forearms and elbows away from the carnage, but the earth is cracking under her as she does, breaking open like there's something in it trying to get out. She hears James shout and Dorcas cry out.

The world tilts on its axis. Mary finds her way to the far wall which divides the grassy strip from the car park and scrabbles her fingernails against it, trying to find grip. Her tangled legs don't want to obey her. She digs her fingers into the mortar between two bricks and pulls herself up, trembling and bow-legged.

The air is full of dust risen from a huge crack in the concrete, which has split in hairline fractures out through the ground, deep and vast. Somewhere in the mist, James is fighting. Mary sees his bony shape hurtle at one of the dark-robed strangers.

"Take that, you piece of shit!" he yells, whiffling the bat into their shoulder, which cracks audibly. They fall, shouting, casting a killing curse up at him which misses his head by half a foot.

"No!" Mary shouts, helpless and desperate. "James—"

A figure staggers over the fissure and towards her, dark against the lingering brightness of magic on the air. Dorcas, limping heavily, leg pouring blood.

They reach each other. Dorcas clings to her tightly for a moment but only a moment, pulling away too soon. "Run,"

she says. "Run, go back to the Order—"

A shadow looms over her.

Mary has a moment, less than a moment— she has been running on stolen time ever since she left her hometown in July last year, running against the clock since the hot summer day when the news arrived. Death has nipped at her heels for a year and it's not about to stop.

She pushes Dorcas out of the way, hard. The death eater waves his wand in an intricate arc; Mary hears Dorcas shout out; the spell that hits her is deep, sickly yellow, and it burns into Mary's stomach like the touch of the sun itself.

She hits the ground, groaning and gasping. Dorcas calls her name. That's one of the last things Mary hears clearly, and she savours it like a sweet in her mouth, tasting it on her tongue until it's too small to feel.

Everything slows down. Through the fuzz in her ears, she can hear more cracks. James is yelling, fighting through the smog. Breaking bones and cracking skulls, and he, too, is running out of time. Dorcas doesn't sweep down to her side, doesn't clutch Mary tight. Nobody comes. It's just her and the concrete, and the dove of hope is flying away in lurching circles above her; she can almost see it.

Spells fly overhead, hitting the clouds in bright, colourful rebounds. The magical matter taints them all strange colours. Blue lightning jumps between them. Mary thinks of Marlene, dark fingers clutching her darker ones. She thinks of Hogwarts and how they were all kids not two years ago. She thinks of her mother's hair. A black nebula.

"I've got this one!" someone shouts over her. Mary blinks; there's a man leaning over here.

This is it. This is where she dies.

He kneels beside her, hands hovering. One of his fingers digs heavy into her burning stomach, where there must be a wound; it feels like there's a hole in it.

"You're going to be okay," he says. "Alright?" Scottish accent, but with an edge to it, like he wasn't brought up English-speaking. Mary's father sounded the same. Like his voice didn't quite know where it belonged.

"Who are you?" Mary whispers. The blood in her mouth tastes like medicine.

"A friend," he tells her. "I'm going to heal you, okay? Nasty spell he used here, do you remember what it was, love?"

"Something yellow," Mary wheezes. She reaches up a hand to grab his jacket. It's slick with blood. "Dorcas— is my friend okay? Dorcas—"

"They're just fine. You've got help," the stranger soothes. He looks very grave now, though. "Yellow?"

"I think so." Mary snuffles. "It *hurts*."

"I know, I know." He hesitates for a moment. "You have to breathe for me, okay? You have to breathe."

Mary tries to draw breath and it catches in the top of her chest. She wheezes, vision blackening in the corners. "I can't— I can't—"

He grabs her shoulders tight. He looks a bit like James, now that she can see him closer. "The quicker your heart rate, the quicker the dark matter will spread. You have to slow your breathing. Breathe with me, okay? In... out..."

But Mary can't do it. She's choking out, spit all congealed in the back of her throat as she tries to suck in a lungful of air through it. She can't get enough oxygen even as she heaves breath after breath, faster and faster until the inside of her mouth is dry and her teeth ache with cold.

The man looks down at her, desperate and tired. He raises his wand.

"I'm sorry about this," he murmurs. "Stupefy."

Dorcas, James, and the Order,

I'm alive.

I can't be moved right now, but I'm alive and well. Well. Not well. We're going to send this via muggle mail to the PO box in hopes it won't be intercepted. One of your foreign insurgent friends has taken me in, and will be sending this letter. He says I'm okay to stay as long as I need to; he's recently had two people move out of his base. We're in Europe. I can't tell you more than that.

I'm very weak. The kettering curse isn't terminal, but he says it'll get worse before it gets better.

Dorcas: I love you. Stay safe, and I'm sorry to leave you again.

James: Please don't die out there.

I'll return the second I'm able. As soon as you get this letter, make sure Gambit and the Friends know to announce that I'm alive on 'Direct Action'. They put me on the deathlist last week. But I'm still here. If my family hear that, it'll destroy them. Marlene, too.

Sorry again,

- Mary Macdonald.

The pain was hot at first, but after the first few days, there is nothing colder than it. It sits in the pit of Mary's chest right under her ribs, wintry as hunger. She trembles with it most of the time. She often wakes up shaking, roused by the sound of the sofa creaking under her.

Iceland is always just a touch too cold, actually. All of it. Even on sunny days, the air is never stagnant. This wind-swept isle feels constantly in motion, like people are always moving through it too quickly and nobody ever stays for long. The basement apartment feels too large for only two people. Like it's missing presences. Like until recently it was haunted and now the ghosts have left.

"You're getting better all the time," Yí'ān tells her cheerily, far too often. "Better, better, *beh* -tter. Like the Beatles song."

"I don't know that one," she replies, trying to sit up. "Too young for the Beatles."

"That's bullshit! You're only... what. Seventeen? You make me feel old."

Mary shrugs. "My parents weren't for British bands much. We would listen to mostly calypso around the house. Trinidadian. TAPSO. London pre-skinhead post-reggae stuff. Windrush punk."

"My family too." He kneels beside the bed to redress her wound. "Immigrant music around the clock. But we still

made time for the Beatles on our discography. We're not heathens."

"Where's your family from, then?"

"Taiwan. Just outside of Toucheng. And yours?"

"Belize. *Belice*. My mother's Yucatán-Mayan."

"And your father?"

"A Ugandan national. First generation. He chose my name."

"Ah."

"They're both in hiding." She squeezes her eyes shut. "They went back to Belmopan when the war started. Knew the death eaters would try to track me down eventually if I left. So I stayed."

"I see."

Mary winces. "Agh," she says.

He pats her shoulder. "Sorry. Just a bit, and I'll be done. Count the seconds, like we said."

She chews her lip until it starts to come apart in her teeth. "Do you have any more of that pain potion you gave me last week?"

"My plug has pulled out on me. Not the season for dittany, and with everything going on with British magical trade routes..." Yí'ān sighs, stoppering the bottle of antiseptic in his hand. "I'll do my best to find you something, though. Muggle pain meds, if we can."

Mary already feels guilty. "You don't have to," she starts.

"Nonsense," Yí'ān replies, waving her off. He finishes rewinding the bandages and pulls them taut around her midriff, hard enough that it hurts a bit. "Of course I have to. All the same war, isn't it? I promised you'd be safe here and I meant it."

"Did you send the letter?"

Yí'ān nods. "On my way back from that job last night," he confirms. Something in his face changes and he examines her closely, with a piercing sort of stare. "You look worried."

"Of course I'm worried," Mary exhales.

"It's only been two weeks."

"Two weeks they've thought I'm dead."

"They won't anymore, though." Yí'ān smiles reassuringly at her, or attempts to. "I've sent a letter to them before. Me and... some friends who were living here a while ago. And it worked then. It'll work now. Have faith in this... this delivery service of yours."

"Not mine," Mary half laughs. "But yeah. I do have faith in it." And she does. If anyone can resurrect her it'll be James Potter. This war has no miracle workers, but it has him. And that's something.

Yí'ān stands up, clicking the first aid kit shut and shuffling it back under the table in the middle of the room. He doesn't quite seem to know how to hold himself in here. He always look at the walls like they did something to hurt him.

"Well," he says. "I'll make tea, then?"

"Yes, please." Mary lies back against the pillows, cupping her hands over the bandages as if trying to keep the wound inside of them.

Yí'ān stumbles out of the living room and Mary hears him pottering around in the kitchen. Making toast too, probably. Eating together is, aside from English, one of the only languages they share. He speaks Icelandic and Norwegian and Mandarin Chinese and a swathe of Scots Gaelic and a touch of French, and some other stuff. Mary speaks a bit of bad, inaccurate Yucatec and the strange Wenglish-ish compound of Belizean Creole, and some osmosised Spanish. None of it feels very secure in her mouth, not out here in cold Iceland.

Things have been strange between them since she woke up here. Not bad-strange. Just strange. Mary remembers little of that night; James' silhouette in the hanging dust, the glowing matter of magic in the air, a bad smell. Pain and yellow light. *I didn't know what else to do*, Yí'ān told her the morning she woke up here, Reykjavik bright as death outside the high windows. *I just knew I couldn't let you die. A friend helped me heal you.*

A friend? she asked.

I've had some fallings out with people, he replied. *I'm a bit on my own right now. I don't know if they'll come back to help again. So we'll have to make do on our own.*

And that was that.

Direct Action was hard to listen to. Mary had been barely a footnote on the deathlist. That stung quite a bit.

There's the sound of something breaking in the kitchen. A dropped mug. "Shit!" Yí'ān shouts to nobody in particular.

“Everything okay?” Mary calls, and coughs as the shout pulls on her sore lungs. She can never get enough oxygen in these days.

“Fine!” Yí’ān shouts back. “Don’t worry about it!”

He stumbles in a few minutes later with two plates of toast, balancing mugs of steaming hot tea.

“You could just levitate them,” Mary laughs. He makes a funny sight.

Yí’ān deposits a chipped plate of toast in her lap and one of the mugs of tea in her hand. “No complaints,” he says, with mock-sternness. “I put my heart and soul into these.”

“Thank you.”

“No worries.” He sits down opposite her. “It’s a bit cold. The toast. I’m shit at this housekeeping thing.”

“How long have you been living on your own?” Mary asks, before realising that she’s probably prying a bit. “Just... since you said that this is new...”

Yí’ān waves off her concern. “It’s fine. Four months,” he sighs. “Four and a half, now.”

Mary blinks at him. “Since the Old War ended?”

“The what?”

“That’s what they’re calling it. The time before he pulled Britain out of the Statute.”

“Oh.” He pauses. “I see. I’d... I’d almost forgotten he did that, frankly. Nothing much came of it... right?”

“We’ve done an okay job of keeping things under lock and key.” Mary sniffs. “Lots of memory modifications. But we can’t keep it up for long.” She looks up at him. “He’s killing us in the street. And the muggles know. Or if they don’t already, they’ll know soon.”

“Shit. I didn’t know it was that bad.”

“The Order’s trying to keep up appearances. They don’t want anybody to panic.”

“Bit late for that, isn’t it?”

Mary shrugs one shoulder. “The Old War was quieter, but we were more honest then.”

“And the New War?”

“Most of my friends will be dead soon.” She looks down at the toast again, which has gone completely cold by now. “We lie more.”

“What does he want?” Yí’ān asks. “Riddle, I mean.”

“He doesn’t want to present himself before the world or something. We were worried he would... declare himself muggle Prime Minister or something. But no such luck.” Mary considers it. “Nonchalance, I think it is. He doesn’t want to look like he cares what the muggles think of him. He’s not going to grant them an official address. Too low for him. He doesn’t want to get his hands dirty.”

Yí’ān chews on that. He takes a sip of his tea. “He has to know international wizarding communities will crack down on him. It was enough of a controversy when he pulled out of the Statute at first. If he starts throwing his weight around enough that it hits the muggle news, or the muggle

authorities figure it out, there'll be a crackdown on him. Wizards are all crazy bastards but that's one thing we'll unite over. Privacy. It's almost cult-like."

"It might not be enough. Rumour has it he's already in negotiations with the French *fachiste*."

"They wouldn't ally with him," Yí'ān says, and takes another sip, though he doesn't look completely sure of himself. "He's come to power too quickly. What has it been now, a year since your war started? Last summer, wasn't it?"

"Most people say it's a year," Mary agrees. "Some of us think it's been more, though. My friend James, he thinks the war started the moment you-know-who kidnapped Sirius Black."

Yí'ān goes still for just a moment. Then he shrugs. "I can get you the next edition of the Prophet, then. And I'll reach out and ask some folks for you, if it'll make you feel better. I've got friends in France."

"Friends who will talk to you?" Mary asks. "Sorry."

"It's fine." He looks only mildly hurt. "Friends who will talk to me. Just might need a bit of convincing."

Mary nods. "Well, thank you," she says. "I mean that. Thank you for everything. I'd be... I'd be dead."

He shakes his head. "We're not thanking people for doing the bare minimum, you bampot. Okay? You're not the first stray I've taken in and you won't be the last."

"Still. I have to say it."

"And here I was, thinking we were good enough friends to skip niceties."

Mary laughs. "You'll have to try a bit harder yet."

"Then I will continue to help as required," Yí'ān snorts. Then, he frowns. "Are you going to eat that?"

Mary pushes the plate back at him. "There's too much butter," she says. "Sorry."

He shakes his head. "It's fine. I can have it."

"It's stone cold."

Yí'ān takes the plate from her. "I'm not picky."

Mary watches in silence as he finishes her toast. Maybe that's the strangeness here; that this can sometimes feel a little too good to be true. The transition from living in London to living in Reykjavik was not a slow thing, nor something she had time to do anything but react to. She feels like a different sort of person to the Mary who's been living on Hackney Terrace for the past four months. There was the world before Little Hangleton, composed mostly of running and hiding, and there was this summer, all violence and deathlists, and now there's Iceland. A different universe. A sanctuary in the way a sedative is a sanctuary.

"Could you help me up?" she asks once Yí'ān is done eating. "I haven't brushed my teeth yet today."

"Of course." He hurries over, putting an arm down around the back of her shoulders. "On three, alright?"

Mary nods. "Three," she says.

"One," Yí'ān cuts in. He pulls her upright.

The pain is phenomenal. Mary thinks she screams but she can't quite be sure; she makes some sort of noise. A shout. Perhaps a laugh. But probably a scream.

"Fuck!" she cries, when she can find words again.

"I've never heard you swear," Yí'ān remarks. "Come on. Almost to your feet now. Just a bit further."

"Give me a second." Mary's shaking hands find their way to her stomach, fluttering there out of instinct. But there's no blood to clog and no wound to hold shut. The bandages are already doing that.

"Try to breathe, alright? Breathing wrong makes it worse —"

"I know," she says. "I know. In. Out. In... out."

"That's right," Yí'ān encourages affably. "That's it."

"I can get to my feet," Mary says eventually.

Yí'ān nods. Gently, he stands up, pulling her with him. It's blinding, cold and stabbing like a sort of hunger. The kettering curse eats you from inside, he told her that first day. Eats your guts from the inside and chews you until it's reached open air.

They find their way upright, both of them. Mary sags heavy and limp across Yí'ān's shoulder and they shuffle from the living room to the bathroom across the hall. Sickness, chronic sickness, it has a timelessness to it. It feels as though this has been forever.

As they pass one of the bedrooms, Mary catches a glimpse of a table full of radios and flashing dials and papers and maps. It sits before a high window looking up at the peaks of the city. The workroom. Yí'ān spends most of his time in there, she knows; she hears him at night. Distress calls and frantic conversations with strangers. Coming and going patroni. He seems mildly overworked at the best of times.

"Here you go," Yí'ān says cheerily, helping her to lean against the doorframe of the bathroom. "Are you okay to get through your routine yourself?"

"Yes," Mary agrees. She flashes a pained smile. "Today's going to be a good day."

"Of course," Yí'ān agrees. "I'll be in the kitchen. Scream if you need me, aye?"

"Will do." With effort, Mary closes the door on him and hobbles to the sink.

Every time she looks at her own reflection in this mirror, she looks less like herself and more like some sickly stranger. An old woman with secrets and tuberculosis. Her whole visage is greying and she's broken out in pimples all around her jaw and neck, standing out white and angry against her dark skin. All the sclera of her eyes is bloody red, so thick with veins that the colour has homogenised. She looks half dead. Angry yellow pustules have sprung up along the sides of her neck like they're trying to choke her.

Mary knows as she looks at herself, with a repetitive, grim settlement of reality, that she is getting worse. That this is getting worse.

In the kitchen, Yí'ān drops something, cursing. Mary gets the impression it was on purpose. Maybe he can feel that

misery too, in his small home with too much space to fill.

WIZARDING COMMUNITY RECLAIMS MORE OF 'OLD MAGICAL LONDON' IN RADICAL MOVE TO RECOVER PUREBLOOD HERITAGE

Daily Prophet, Morning Edition, August 11th, 1977.

After the historic reclamation of Cecil Court from the hands of muggle authorities earlier this month, once again a successful negotiation by the Commission for the Preservation of Pureblood Heritage has resulted in the retrieval of another section of Old Magical London. Cecil Court's adjoining roads, Charing Cross Road and St. Martin's Lane, were claimed as magical property late last night, and their unlawful occupants have been evicted.

The recent rediscovery of Old Magical London, the section of our nation's capital first established by ancient Pureblood societies and stolen by mugglekind in the Dark Ages, has brought comfort, vindication and hope to magical Brits throughout the country. The Commission for the Preservation of Pureblood Heritage (CPPH), lead by Ministry worker and trusted benefactor Lucius Malfoy, has spearheaded the fight for Pureblood liberation, and has been received by the public with overwhelming positivity and hope.

"Having this part of our history returned to us," said Ministry worker Alfalfa Dendron when interviewed at last night's press release, "it means more than we can say. For years, my family has sought a place to belong and been unable to find it in New Wizarding London, what with the liberal policies on blood purity. Returning to our rightful home will provide the core of our community, real witches

and wizards who care deeply about protecting our own, with new opportunities. Honestly, it's wonderful. Truly. We have the Minister to thank for that."

When asked, Secretary Malfoy said, "We're certainly not through yet. We intend to impart on all true witches and wizards the right to their heritage and inheritance in full, and to provide our communities with lasting abundance and prosperity. We will not be complicit in the destruction of our livelihoods anymore. We will rebuild Old Magical London from the ground up, and we will do so with the full support of all of magical Britain."

The Minister for Magic is unable to give comment at this time. (story continued on page four.)

Mary sleeps more and more in the coming days, unable to escape it. It chases her into the mornings and consumes her evenings. Iceland doesn't get much daylight at the best of times. She sees very little of it.

The hungry-pain gets worse. No matter how much she eats, she can't be rid of it. Yí'ān reassures her often that even if it gets worse before it gets better, it'll get better nonetheless. She's not sure whether she believes him.

By the time it has been three weeks stuck in this apartment, Mary has had enough; she decides that she needs to see it. Properly.

She waits up late one night, forcing herself to stay awake as the lights of the city blink dim through the living room window. Yí'ān stays up working on the comms desk until two in the morning, and Mary spends the whole wait staring at the ceiling with her eyes burning holes through it.

By the time she hears him get up, yawn and shuffle into the first bedroom, she's almost asleep. But the moment she hears his bedroom door click shut, she blinks furiously, raising a hand to pinch her own cheek. *Stay awake. You have to know. You have to see.*

Mary knows logically that if she asked, Yí'ān would show her. He's been nothing if not accommodating. But she needs to do this for herself, she knows, knows it as fiercely as she's ever known anything.

In the pure darkness, she heaves herself upright, biting her lip so hard she tastes blood. Every movement seems to bypass surface level pain and go straight to the synapses in her nervous system. It's fire, but not. Hot, but not. The sort of pain that sets all of your teeth on edge.

"Fuck," Mary murmurs. Very slowly, she swings her legs off the side of the sofa and hauls herself to her feet.

It's blinding; her vision spots out for a second. But she stays up. Bent double at the waist, Mary fumbles her way across the room, shuffling socked feet against the carpet. She grabs the doorframe and edges the door open, clutching at the wall to keep from falling.

She can't describe the sensation. Exhaustion that sits right behind your eyes. When pain is intense enough it short-circuits your brain, and every time she breathes in she's not in Iceland anymore, she's sitting in the Charms classroom. Reading the back of the textbook, scanning the acknowledgements, pretending to concentrate. Sitting in the Charms classroom. The geometric walls stretch wide around her. And then she exhales and she's back in her own body.

The hallway is a dark and narrow and stretches out ahead of her for what feels like miles. Meticulously quiet, Mary pads down it, stopping every few seconds to blink the sight back into her eyes. By the time she reaches the bathroom, she's so unsteady on her feet that she doesn't know how she'll make it back down to the living room. Feet not quite obeying her, she staggers inside, shutting the door.

Mary fumbles for the light switch and flicks it on. The room expands around her in a flash of blinding fluorescence, then dims. And then she's staring herself down in the mirror.

She looks sicker than ever, heavy bags of tired skin hanging under her eyes. Mary notices that her shoulders aren't quite sitting right; they're risen too high, curled around her tight, tense with pain. Her lips are slightly parted. Air whistles between them. She tries to close them and they don't quite stick, too chapped, too dry.

"Oh," she murmurs. With one hand, she clutches the sink, and with the other she raises the bottom of her sweatshirt.

Under it, an expanse of pristine white bandages. Nothing incredibly gruesome, but Mary knows better than to trust first appearances after all this time. It's distended in places. Something awful underneath.

The bandages come apart too easily. Mary pries them apart with the backs of her overlong fingernails, strip by stripe opening wide in a maw. They're tightly wrapped, hiding their secret well, but she is nothing if not determined. Under them lies a tufty patch of gauze and, very carefully, Mary peels it back.

The wound is not red and bleeding, not like any injury Mary has ever had. It's pure black, blacker than her skin, a great

cleft through her flesh that leaves it in torn shreds on either side.

And it's moving. Deep inside the wound, it's moving. Small, black patches of matter wriggling around, writhing like they're trying to find their way all the way through her.

Mary's throat fills with bile. She barely keeps it down. She knows she should replace the gauze and look away, but she can't stop looking at it, drinking in the whole terrible reality of the wound, of what it means. Forget her own face; this makes her a stranger. This thing inside of her, foreign and making her a part of it. Eating away bits of her stomach lining. Kettering the flesh from her bones.

There's a sound outside of the bathroom. Mary flinches so hard she almost falls over. Her vision blurs with hot tears. Busted. Hey, at least now she'll have a shoulder to cry on about it.

But she realises then: it's not Yí'ān. It's the apartment's external buzzer.

It rings again, loud and rattling. Then again. There's movement deeper into the flat and Yí'ān comes shuffling out of his room, yawning audibly. He moves past the bathroom to the door.

"Já, halló?" he asks.

There's silence on the other end of the intercom. Then, a voice, younger and a bit higher than Yí'ān's. "It's me."

Mary knows that voice from somewhere, she's sure of it. Slowly, not making a sound, she leans back against the wall, one hand still on the sink.

Yí'ān doesn't speak for a moment. "Are you here to talk?" he asks eventually.

"Yeah."

"Okay. I'll buzz you in."

"Thanks," the voice replies. It's just faintly accented. Londonish.

There's a buzzing sound. Mary hears Yí'ān sigh and slump against the wall. He swears under his breath. This feels illicit. Mary thinks she should probably announce herself, but she doesn't know how to say it. Her heart feels stuck in her throat.

Thirty seconds later, there's a very tentative-sounding knock at the front door. Yí'ān draws a deep breath and opens it.

"Hello, Sirius," he sighs.

Mary barely stifles a gasp.

"Hey," Sirius' voice replies, cracking on the word. That's where she recognises it from. It's him. It's really him. "Sorry it's so late."

"Don't apologise," Yí'ān says evenly. "You look awful."

"Yeah. I've been sleeping in this youth hostel in Hungary. Near her. It's shit. I got kicked out, 'cos I... well. Not the most pleasant houseguest."

There's silence for a bit. "Sirius," Yí'ān sighs.

"I'm sorry," Sirius says with some desperation. "Yí'ān, I'm so sorry. I'm so, so sorry."

"I told you not to apologise," Yí'ān starts.

"But I should. I... I need to."

"I don't need apologies from you. And you don't owe them to me. You should go to sleep, we've got a spare sofa, you can talk to me about this in the morning—"

There's a scuffling sound. Someone shuts the front door.

"No," Sirius says, voice closer now. "No, we... we should talk about this now."

"Then give me answers."

"I can't just— it's not just—"

"It is," Yí'ān says. Then, his voice seems to break. "Sirius, Claude *won't talk to me*. They haven't spoken to me properly in three months. Helped me out of a jam one time three weeks ago, didn't speak a word to me. Left afterwards. They won't answer my letters or my calls."

"It's my fault."

"I don't care whose fault it is. I just need it to stop."

"I didn't know it would upset you so much," Sirius murmurs. "I thought— I assumed you had other friends—"

"And most of them are dead," Yí'ān snaps. "Because of this war we're all fighting. These wars. Small wars, that's what she said. And look at you. You left."

"I can come back."

"You have to fix things first." There's movement. Mary imagines Yí'ān has taken a step towards him. In a lower

voice, he says, “I’ve almost lost Galina, and I won’t have her for much longer. I can barely spare the time to visit her as she dies. I’ve lost Claude, for as long as they stay away. I can’t lose you too.”

“I’m sorry,” Sirius says again, sounding so miserable that if Mary was in Yí’ān’s place, she would have already forgiven him. “I don’t know how to make it better.”

“You can start by staying the night,” Yí’ān instructs. “Sleep on the sofa. Take the bed, if you want. I’ll sleep on the floor, I don’t care. Whatever. Just stay. And tomorrow—” He cuts himself off. “Tomorrow, you tell me what happened in that cave with Claude. You tell me everything.”

“That’s not my secret to tell—”

“I can’t go on not knowing!” Yí’ān explodes. “Little Hangleton almost kills you, you shake and shake for days and you don’t talk for a month and we think you’re going to die of starvation before Riddle gets to you. And in the middle of the night you’re just gone, you don’t tell us, and then you show up hours later with Claude like... like that. Fucking mumbling and crying. Begging to die. Something about a potion, a cave, what were we supposed to think—and by the time Galina had to go inpatient at the hospital you’d left—”

“Don’t remind me,” Sirius begs. “Please don’t remind me. Yí’ān. Please.”

“Then tell me what you’ve been doing, at least!”

“I’ve been trying to destroy it!” he snaps.

Yí’ān goes silent for a moment. “It?”

“Them. I’ve got two now.”

“I’m not stupid. I know that. That locket, too. However you got your hands on it.”

“It’s not going well,” Sirius admits in a small voice. There’s the sound of shuffling clothing.

Yí’ān hisses between his teeth. “Oh, kid...”

“It’s not as bad as it looks.”

“Don’t bullshit me.”

“Look, let’s go in here, when you see it under the light it’s really not—”

The bathroom door opens. Mary freezes.

Sirius Black has changed drastically. His hair hangs far below his elbows in a scraggly, dark mass. He looks unwell, like her, sort of grey and sallow with bloodshot eyes, too small for his heavy, dark jacket. And he’s holding his arm out in front of him, a great dark mass in the centre of his forearm, blackness gathered around a thin scar. Lights blink bright beneath the surface of his skin.

He blinks at her. “Mary?” he asks. Then, “Merlin, what happened to your stomach?”

Chapter End Notes

- [Official Tumblr](#)
- [Twitter Quotes Bot](#) (admin: [lupinlesbian](#))
- [Pinterest Board](#) (admin: [plantfeline](#))
- [Fic Playlist](#)
- [Podfic](#)

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NEWHAVEN

Chapter Notes

curse it all blast it ! i have had little time to respond to comments as of late! rest assured ive been reading and loving them! will get back on that soon i promise. if you do have any specific questions though, or if you just want to make friends, you should pop over to my tumblr! it's linked at the bottom.

tw: blood, injury, mild gore, dark themes, mental illness, unhealthy relationship dynamics. just lots of sad and anger etc.

enjoy lovelies!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The day rises grey and blustery, unusually cold for summer but not unusual in the slightest for 1977's London. Dorcas crouches atop the rickety black fire escape, shot to hell by weather and age. She's been there so long that her legs have begun to go numb, knees locking under her and shaking with mild tension.

The death eater in the street below, patrolling the edge of wizarding territory, isn't the smartest. Evidently, he's been put on this deserted street for a reason; they don't trust him to be able to tell the difference between his left and his right, let alone spot and catch an intruder. The son of a pureblood family, she speculates. British-born and a dunce who failed most of his OWLs and had fakes certified out of the country.

The nearest fellow lookout is a few streets over, on the west side of Old Wizarding London. If Dorcas is spotted now, she's dead.

Luckily, she's far smarter than that.

Cold wind whips down the cobblestone below, throwing dry leaves into the air. Torn down by uncharacteristic heat and thawed by cold as they scattered across the ground. The death eater shivers, wrapping his cloak tightly around himself. He could probably just cast a warming spell on himself, but he doesn't.

"Hey!" shouts a voice across the street.

Dorcas flinches so hard she almost falls from her perch, barely keeping her balance. She cranes to look over her shoulder; it's another death eater, striding down the abandoned road with his cloak whipping out behind him.

And he's not looking at her. Thank god.

"Rowle?" the death eater on guard yells back.

"I was wondering where you'd gotten to, Burke," Rowle calls. "Malfoy's construction warders will be here shortly. They want you moved down to Charing Cross Road."

"I was supposed to be here for the whole morning—"

"Plans change," Rowle snaps. He reaches Burke and looks him up and down. Rowle's got a very mean face, a bit rattish with a small, pinched nose. "You'll be moving in ten minutes."

Burke nods frantically. "Got it. Apologies."

“Do not apologise,” Rowle replies, without the benevolence the statement implies. “How’s your family?”

“We’re alright. Well enough. My wife is eager to get us moved in, once construction is complete.”

“I’m not surprised. How many children is it that you have?”

“One. A second on the way.”

“I see,” Rowle says with disdain. He’s silent for a moment, watching Burke intently.

“What is it?” Burke asks, with a little more confidence.

Rowle clears his throat. “There have been rumours,” he says delicately. “Rumours that the Black mistress... that she has asked a favour of you.”

“That’s not her surname anymore—”

“Black is Black is Black,” Rowle snipes, impatient. “I’ll take that to mean I’m not supposed to ask?”

“It’s confidential,” Burke says, without much conviction.

“Confidential to even the Dark Lord?”

“No.” Burke puffs up his chest. “In fact, it involves the Dark Lord directly. Which is why it would be quite impertinent to tell you anything, Rowle.”

Rowle laughs in the back of his throat and the sound is so full of bitterness he might as well have swallowed a mouthful of engine oil. “The Dark Lord himself? I am remiss to call you a liar, Burke, but I don’t believe you would still be on guard duty in the streets if you were aiding the Dark

Lord himself, directly. I should have known none of it was true."

"Believe what you want," Burke says airily. "But know that when the time comes, I have been useful to him. Very useful indeed. When the time comes, he will trust me."

Quick as a whip, Rowle pulls out his wand. "That sounds very much like mutiny," he says silkily. "When the time comes? I wasn't aware we were waiting for something."

Burke does not reach for his own wand. He seems to know that he's got the upper hand here. Dorcas watches him tilt his head ever so slightly to the side.

"We're always waiting for something," he murmurs. "Aren't we?"

Rowle raises his wand to dig the tip into the underside of Burke's chin. "You would be wise to make an ally of me."

Burke glances left and right, up and down the street. People like this, men like this, they construct their own downfall. They build their own pyre. He does not look up.

"I mean that," Rowle snaps.

Burke steps back. "Ask Miss Black yourself, then." And with that, he strides off down the street, black robes whipping in the wind behind him. The temporary victor of a very small war.

Rowle waits until Burke is out of sight to punch the wall, hard enough that dust cascades from a loose brick. He swears loudly and then stalks off in the other direction, down the street, around the corner.

Dorcas is alone. With a quick glance around, she shuffles back to sit more comfortably on the fire escape, sighing silently. It's miserable work, but at least today she's got something to report back with. That's not the case most of the time.

Barely half an hour later, when her legs are starting to go numb again, there's a sharp crack nearby. It rings through the empty streets like a gunshot.

"A potioneer we know has been working on something to silence apparition sounds," Fabian Prewett greets from across the rooftop. He jogs towards Dorcas and helps her out of the fire escape and up onto the concrete. "Not done yet. We'll need it sooner rather than later."

"You're lucky the guard just left," Dorcas agrees. "Everything calm at HQ?"

"As calm as things get," Prewett says grimly. "We lost Medlar. A raid, three hours ago. Kent. In front of a family in a park."

"Fuck."

"I know. They've got a handful of muggles in Hackney Terrace, for memory modifications. You'll have to get up the stairs quietly." Prewett lowers his voice. "Aves doesn't like being distracted while she's working."

"You think I don't know that? She threatened to make me forget my own birthday last week. She's crazy," Dorcas mutters.

Fabian takes her arm. "Everybody's crazy these days. Hold on tight, now."

With a twist and a snap like elastic, he disappears, pulling Dorcas into the void with him.

HQ is dour when they get inside. Dorcas thinks she can taste the fresh mourning on the air already. Death never has a chance to settle in here, to go stale and rot with age. It's always young. There's always more of it.

Fabian leaves her in the entrance hallway. "I need to pick up your replacement. You're on shift again tomorrow morning, aren't you?"

"Yeah. I'll see you then." She forces a smile. Someone — one of the muggles, probably — is sobbing in the dining room.

He smiles back, quite strained. Then, he closes the door on her, shutting the last of the sunlight out.

Rubbing tired eyes, Dorcas shuffles down the hallway to the stairs leading up to the first floor. There's a bloodstain on the floor, probably from a survivor of a recent raid, which nobody has bothered to clean up. Someone has left a magical post-it on the door to the kitchen, stuck down with a sticking charm. *DO NOT DISTURB*, it reads.

"Okay then," Dorcas mutters to herself. She turns left and starts up the stairs two at a time, trying her best to be quiet but at the same time not trying particularly hard.

Upstairs it's very quiet. Hackney Terrace has three floors and an attic, surprisingly large for a muggle home. Intended for families, someone told her once. And look how well that turned out. Irony has a bitter taste to it, less sharp than grief but twice as mocking. There's a herd of centaurs on the first floor, as well as a handful of ex-students, too old for Rostock but too young to fight. Supplies on the second

floor, mostly, as well as the cupboardish room that belongs only to her and James now. Prisoners in the basement: a handful of death eaters too stupid to make it out of a fight. A few Order members in the attic.

She passes nobody on her way up the second flight of stairs. Dorcas pauses outside of the closed door of her and James' room, listening with her ear pressed to the wood.

"Reparo," James is murmuring inside. "Reparo. Reparo."

"Alright?" Dorcas asks, pushing the door open with deliberate volume.

Sitting cross-legged on his mattress, James flinches hard. The pieces of that mirror he's always trying to fix sit on the covers in front of him, still broken. There's a small blue flame floating above the floor a few feet from his spot, suspended aloft, emitting a faint heat. HQ gets cold a lot. Nobody's paid for heating.

"Yeah," he mumbles, sweeping the shards into his hands and dropping them into his pocket. "Uh, yeah. I just woke up. Was the shift okay?"

"Fine. Uneventful." Dorcas decides not to tell James what she heard between Rowle and Burke. It can stay between her and McGonagall. That's probably for the best. "I thought you were going to get some of those letters sorted out? They're piling up."

"I'm getting to it," James says broodishly.

Dorcas points to the three plastic bin bags full of unopened letters, leaning against the wall where Mary's mattress was only three weeks ago. "I can tell."

He scowls at her, seeming to want to pick a fight but knowing that he'll lose. He opens his mouth and then closes it again and looks away.

"That's what I thought," Dorcas says, feeling vindicated.

"Shut it," James mutters.

She crosses the room to her own mattress, sitting down and beginning to unlace her own boots. "Have you heard from them lately, then? Is that what's gotten you into a slump?"

"Mary died."

Dorcas stills. "Mary died," she snaps, "and it hasn't stopped me from doing my job."

She can see James' stare. "It hasn't stopped you," he mutters. "It's just made you weird and fucking obsessive. And for your information, I haven't. Heard from them, I mean. Except for the letter Lily sent HQ a few weeks ago. And that wasn't for me."

"You still read it."

"Of course I did. It's Lily."

"That's confidential Order information."

"Nothing's a secret anymore," James says, with an air of impatience and a bit of condescension there, too. The blue flame between them flickers. "Thought you would've learned that."

Dorcas thinks of Rowle and Burke, whatever great unspoken thing was hovering between them. How they

spoke of waiting for something. Waiting for something to give.

"I'm well aware," she sighs. "What was in that, anyway?"

"Thought you said it was confidential."

"No secrets."

James rolls his eyes. "An update on Rostock. Nothing much about her. She seems to be doing alright. Surviving, anyway. She's good at that," he says with restrained fondness, before coughing, as if trying to dislodge the love from his throat. "And, uh, she said things are going well over there. They're expanding. Making allies. With the French resistance, mostly. They've had some trouble with some Berliners, she said, but aside from that..."

He trails off, shrugging.

"If you get to write back to her, let her know I said hello," Dorcas instructs.

"I'm not going to write back."

She stares. "Why?"

"I don't think she wants to hear from me. Honestly, I don't blame her."

"Yes you do."

James shrugs. "Maybe I do. Doesn't matter."

Dorcas stares at him until her eyes start to hurt. "So you're just not going to send a letter? You've got her address. You're the fucking— the fucking mail guy. That's sort of your thing."

“Since when is it my thing?” James asks, annoyed.

“Since you started a mailing service.”

“I’m not writing back to her,” he sighs. “Okay? Not doing that. She hasn’t written to me. She’d rather not talk to me, I know that. So I’m just not going to bother her.”

“Because you’ve had such a problem with bothering people in the past.”

He shoots her a very sharp look. “Evidently I was very good at it, considering. I could say the same about you.”

Dorcas knows immediately that he’s talking about Marlene. Marlene, gone without a word. No letters.

“Shut your mouth,” she snarls.

James raises his hands in front of him in a universal gesture of apology. “I didn’t mean that.”

Dorcas stands up. Bile rises in her throat. “At least only one person has left me behind,” she snaps. “Not three.”

She watches James’ face break. He looks at her with this awful, raw hurt. She immediately wants to say sorry but doesn’t, too. Doesn’t want to apologise. Doesn’t think he deserves it. Dorcas isn’t sure why.

“That’s really low,” he mutters.

“Maybe if you actually did your job,” she replies, gesturing to the bags of letters. “You’d know if any of them have written to you.”

“Yeah, well,” James spits, “maybe if you’d taken that curse instead of Mary, she would still be here.”

Dorcas stares. "Excuse me?"

"I didn't mean that."

"Of course you didn't. You never mean anything." She stands up. "Said you'd work for the Order, but you never take shifts unless you have to. Said you'd take over the mailing service but we're backlogged by weeks. Said you'd get your act together, but you're still moping because Lupin isn't here to suck your dick—"

James launches to his feet. "Take it back!"

"No! You don't get to say shit about Mary, not when she's—she's—" Unbidden, Dorcas feels tears spring to her eyes. She rubs her face curiously, hands clawed, until she can feel blood close to the surface of the skin.

"You can say it," James yells. "Dead! At least I'm not trying to forget she existed—"

"I hate you, you know that? I wish you'd left with Black, I hate you, I can't stand the sight of you." Dorcas isn't even sure what she's saying anymore. She knows one thing only: that she wants to cause as much hurt as possible.

He shoves past her to the bags of letters, hauling one up with both hands. The ridge of his broken chest juts against his sweatshirt as he waves it at her. "You care so much about this shit? Take it." And he hurls the bag underarm at her.

On instinct, Dorcas dodges out of the way. The bin bag hurtles past her and skids across the floor right into the hovering blue flame, which spits and hisses as it hits the black plastic. Smoke rises in a ghostly myr, up towards the stained ceiling.

“No!” James shouts, but it’s too late; a moment later, the whole bag is aflame. “Shit!”

Dorcas leans against the wall. “You’re so stupid. You’re so stupid.”

Blueish light dances fanciful across the walls. Sparks pop across the floor, leaving small, black marks there, and the acrid smell of burning plastic fills the room. James clambers past the burning mess and grabs his wand off the bed.

“Aguamenti!” he shouts.

When the water hits the flame, it hisses angrily, spitting black smoke. It might as well be one of the old balefires from Tadjoura, spotted on visits to see family there as a child. Burning in rippling stripes across the gulf, the reflections of them ghostly. Dorcas feels intensely homesick at that moment. She would like to be anywhere but here.

James stamps out what remains of the fire. The letters sit in a soaked, pulpy mess in the sticky melted plastic and the soot.

“Fuck!” he says. The fire alarm goes off.

Marlene,

So I suppose you’ve probably heard the news already, presuming you listen to ‘Direct Action’, which pretty much every one of us this side of Europe does. That’s assuming you’re still on this side of Europe though. The last time you wrote was, what, two months ago? A bit less? You said you were in Spain then. I wonder if you’ve moved since. Probably, knowing you. Always running. Always on the move. Can’t stay put. It’s poetic, isn’t it? The three of us.

We clicked together in the first place because none of us were all-the-way British, because home felt nebulous sometimes, because none of us knew quite what belonging felt like. And we're here again. Running again. Out of time and out of place again.

Anyway, that letter was for Mary, not me, so by all rights I shouldn't have read it. She shared it with me anyway, because she shares everything, anything. Shared anything. That's the news. Shared (past tense).

I'm trying not to be sad about it. No fucking point. She was there and then she was down. One of them grabbed her and apparated away. Stunner right to the face, and a Kettering curse, one of the Order members told us after. It kills slowly. Hard to stop unless you've got the right potions. I suppose it's a mercy the death eaters took her. They will have killed her quickly. She would've died slow if we managed to get her home.

Christ. Way to start a letter, right? I'll never get to send this so I guess it doesn't matter. You know I'm not really angry at you, don't you? Well. I am. I'm really, really angry at you. I hate you. A part of me hopes you die out there, Marlene. But if you came back tomorrow I wouldn't even ask you to apologise. I wouldn't even ask you to stay. I don't know if I could ask for anything from you. I don't know if you'd be sad or angry or something else.

I don't know what I'm saying. Saying this stuff is hard and it's also scarily easy. It's like a plug pulled. I've started and now I can't stop. But it's getting late. I'm tired. James burned a bag of letters today. What a prick. Before even sorting them. For all I know, there was a letter in there from you.

Ha. As if.

When Dorcas wakes the following morning, the other two bags are gone.

“Threw them out,” James says gruffly. “We were never going to get through them all. I’m going to get the next load from the PO box later.”

Rubbing her eyes, Dorcas sits up. “There could have been vital information in those. You can’t throw lives away.”

“Can’t I?” James asks, and steps out of the bedroom, shrugging a shirt on, all tense with pain. He was up in the night trying to tape together that mirror. Dorcas could hear him as she wrote her letter on the mattress opposite.

She dresses quickly and without much fuss. Downstairs in the dining room, which is more of a meeting room at this point, James is chewing on a slice of dry toast, sitting opposite Aves and Mulholland, who are making quiet, ambicable conversation. Ex-members of the Muggle Liason Office, both of them foreigners who came here for work and never left once the war started. Good at obliating, bad at socialising.

“Morning,” Dorcas says to them pointedly. She sits down beside James and steals the other slice of toast on his plate. “You seriously don’t butter your toast?”

James shrugs. “Makes me feel sick lately.”

“Oh, well I’m sorry I asked.”

“Get off my back, Dorcas.”

Aves glances up at them both. Her family's from the wizarding bit of Assab, north up the Horn from where Dorcas' parents are from, which Dorcas was excited about at first before she realised that Aves is a bit of a dick. Needless to say they haven't had any long, healing conversations about their childhoods.

"Fighting, are we?" she asks.

James shrugs. "Why are you two here?"

"They're bringing in a muggle couple soon," Mulholland puts in, eyeing James. "An attack not far from Liverpool. This morning."

"Ah, shit," James says.

They shrug. "Nobody's dead."

"Yet," Aves corrects. "Nobody's dead yet."

"The fighting isn't over?" James half-rises from his chair. Dorcas drags him back down.

"Not as far as we know. Last we heard, they're sending more of the Order in to help finish it," Mulholland says. They've got a very blank, blunt way of saying things. It is not helpful.

"Moody just came through not five minutes ago," Aves adds. She takes a long sip of black coffee. "He didn't ask for us to send in the child soldiers yet, though. We'll let you know if he does."

"We're not children," Dorcas says.

"We're both of age," James adds.

Dorcas scowls at him. He scowls right back.

Aves shrugs. "Then you're both very baby-faced compared to the rest of us."

Parting her lips just a bit in the way that she knows shows off the scar across them, Dorcas pokes her tongue into the corner of her mouth and shrugs, saying nothing and folding her arms.

James is not so diplomatic. "We've been fighting in this since the Old War. Since it started."

"A year of running from masked men. I apologise for not calling you brave."

"Aves," Mulholland sighs. "Don't."

Aves shrugs and looks away. "Forgive me for not thinking it's great for the British to send their children to war."

James stands up. His chair screams against the floor. Without a word, he walks out, a surprisingly restrained move for him of all people. Dorcas never knew him to have a temper before — that was always Sirius — but he wears it like a scar now.

Mulholland glances from Aves to Dorcas and then down at their coffee.

"One of the muggles we dealt with last night tripped over the table leg and hurt her face," they say. "Is there an accident form for that?"

Aves snorts like it's funny. It sort of is.

Dorcas shakes her head. "No."

“Right.”

They all lapse into awkward silence. Dorcas finishes her slice of toast and starts on James', not speaking. The fire crackles in the grate at the end of the room, orange and red and white, not green. Fabian will be here to pick her up for her shift on watch in Old Magical London soon. Provided he isn't in Liverpool right now; provided he isn't dead.

Dorcas feels in her pocket to find something to do with her hands. There's paper in there. She pulls it out and it's the letter she wrote last night. For Marlene.

“What's that?” Aves asks.

Dorcas glances up at her. Slowly, she tears it in half. Then she puts the pieces together and tears them again, and then again, until her hands are full of tiny white shreds, sitting between her fingers, none of the words readable anymore.

“Nothing,” she says.

“Are your family in Britain?”

“For now. They might be travelling home to Tadjoura soon, to get away from the war. They still want me to come home to them. So I can run, too.”

“Why don't you?”

“My face is in the papers,” Dorcas replies, trying to inflect the words with an amount of sharpness that she can't quite feel. “I can't put them in danger.”

“How noble.”

Dorcas watches her. "I'm not running from this."

Perhaps that's what the shredded letter in her hands could be replaced with. A note to Marlene that simply reads, *I'm not like you.*

Aves looks away first. "I'm sorry," she says after a few moments.

"Are you?"

"No," she admits. "But your heart, it's in the right place."

"But you still think I shouldn't be here."

"I think none of us should be here."

Dorcas nods. She shuffles the bits of paper into a little pile on the table, pressing them tight together like a sculptor and then spreading them apart again.

She opens her mouth to speak, but before she can say anything, there's a crackle from across the room. The fire in the grate rears and spits, flames turning ashy, sickening green.

They all jump to their feet. A dark figure appears in the flames and staggers onto the soot rug. They look up.

"Shacklebolt?" Dorcas demands. Then, before he can respond, she pulls out her wand and levels it with his face. "What's the last thing you said to me? The last time we saw each other?"

Shacklebolt stares down the end of her wand, eyes flitting to her face and back again. "I told you to make sure Potter stays in line."

“What?” James says from the doorway, panting from his run down the stairs. “Excuse me?”

Dorcas waves him off. She crosses the room to Shacklebolt’s side. “Are— are you hurt, sir?”

“Fine,” Shacklebolt says grimly, though he’s leaning around his ribs a little too far, as if shielding them. “We’ve got injured coming through, though. Muggles.”

Aves steps forwards. “How long was the attack?”

“You’ll have to replace four or five hours of memories.”

She nods. “Not too much work, then.”

“Not for you lot,” Shacklebolt agrees, panting. He staggers to a chair. “The attack— it started for... leisure. They were having fun.”

A chill runs down Dorcas’ spine. “Oh.”

He shakes his head, looking like he doesn’t know what to say. Stony-faced, James stumbles into the room, taking a seat at the table.

“Fun?” he asks.

Shacklebolt nods, rubbing at his tired eyes. “No purpose to it.”

“Is anybody dead?” Marlene asks.

“Not yet.”

“Fuck,” James says. He stands up. “I’m going out there.”

“No you’re not,” Shacklebolt replies immediately.

“Yeah,” Dorcas agrees. “Not without your bat you’re not. Come on.”

Shacklebolt stands up so quickly that it makes both of them jump. “No,” he snaps. “You’ll only get in the way.”

“We’ve been working for you for four months, I think we can handle—”

“You can’t,” he says shortly. “That’s final.”

James stares, outraged. He opens his mouth, probably to argue, and then closes it again, huffing and sitting back down.

“Christ,” Dorcas mumbles, mostly to herself. She sits down again too. “Is it bad, then? Really bad?”

Shacklebolt nods. He looks from Dorcas to James. Some understanding sits between them; they’ve met before, Dorcas thinks.

“Yes,” he confirms. “It’s really bad.”

James seems to sink in on himself. “Right,” he murmurs.

They wait in tense silence. Minutes pass like sand through their fingers. Dorcas drums her nails on the table incessantly until she gets the impression that it’s setting the others on edge and she stops. No others arrive for ten, fifteen, twenty minutes. It feels like years.

James shuffles his chair closer to her at some point. Dorcas isn’t sure why. She shuffles her own farther away.

“You know, we’ve got other places to be—” Aves starts.

The fire looms large again, green sparks spitting across the floor. Two figures step out, robed and coughing with ash. Leaning so heavily on one another they might as well be one body.

They stagger and hit the table. Dorcas gets to her feet, James beside her. Someone asks a question, someone shouts.

More people begin to pour through the floor.

Lots of them, lots of them; the first two, leading the onslaught, are Moody, cheek so badly torn it's falling off his face, and McGonagall, so unkempt and dirty that Dorcas doesn't recognise her. After them, the Prewett twins, covered in ash and both bruised in the face. Behind them stumble two Order members carrying a cloth stretcher, which Jeremiah is sprawled on, unconscious with his face swollen high with angry blisters. Behind them, hurtling from the flames with such force that she hits the carpet on both elbows, Gambit, cracking with bad magic. Tripping over her, Palomer, holding the halves of her snapped wand.

It's a mire of suffering, almost immediately, too much of it to know where to start. James and Dorcas both stand frozen at the side of the room, staring. Waiting for direction.

"Healers!" McGonagall's voice shouts through the din, as more of their sorry lot stagger through. "We need healers! Quickly!"

James digs his hand into his pocket, pulling out his wand. "Uh— uh—"

"There," Dorcas says, and pulls him to the nearest body she can see. An Order member on a stretcher that she doesn't

know the name of, laid out on the ground now. Cold. Her pale face is grey, her eyes closed.

James collapses beside her. “Where’s the injury— the injury —”

“I don’t know.” Dorcas reaches out to touch the side of her face. She’s ice cold.

“Let me see—” James puts a hand over her wrist, and then another over her clavicle. Then, like he’s been burnt, he lurches away. “She’s dead!” he shouts. “She’s dead—”

Dorcas stares, horrified. She scrambles backwards across the floor to get as far from the body as possible, not wanting to touch it, not wanting to be near it in any capacity.

“Shit!” she yells.

“Healers!” someone shouts again. “Please—!”

She isn’t sure if it’s James that pulls her up or if she’s the one who helps him. They stumble to their feet together, and James grabs her by the arm and pulls her through the crowd to Jeremiah’s stretcher. He’s awake, eyes rolling, hands twitching wildly in his lap.

“Cruciatus curse,” Gambit gasps from beside him. “Knock him out.”

James nods with determination. “Stupe— Stu—” And his hands are trembling too hard to aim right.

Dorcas grabs him around the wrists to steady him. “There,” she says. “Now.”

Nodding his thanks, James draws a deep breath. "Stupefy."

Jeremiah goes still, slumping like he's died. Even in unconsciousness he keeps twitching, the tendons in his neck jumping.

"Don't look," Dorcas murmurs. "Come on. Come on. Stay with me."

James nods. He tears his gaze away. He isn't going to run from this any more than she is; Dorcas looks at him and thinks she understands him better than she ever has before; he can't leave things, he can't walk away from things, he doesn't know how to. They're the same, in that way.

A figure staggers through the chaos towards them. Caradoc Dearborn. Uninjured, but his eyes are huge and very wide, as if he's waiting for the death eaters to come hurtling through the walls and attack them at any moment.

"We've got a muggle kid here," he says. "Heal her. Sit with her. One of you."

"I'll go," James says immediately. Dorcas is glad for it. She's shit with kids.

"Good luck," Dorcas murmurs to him.

He squeezes her arm one last time and lets go, staggering off through the crowd, over a collapsed stranger, sobbing. Over a body, still. Dorcas catches a glimpse of him sitting down beside a bleeding girl against the far wall and lowering his head to talk to her, all of his movements gentle.

Someone grabs her arm. Dearborn. "Moody," he says. "Go."

Dorcas shakes herself. She nods and treks across the room to the table, which Alastor Moody is leaning against heavily, dripping blood all over the place, the flesh of his face hanging grotesquely. The inside of it is on the outside now.

"Episkey," he's murmuring, pointing his wand at it. Dorcas can see his teeth click together through the wound. The molars don't fit together right. "Episkey."

"Wrong spell, sir," she says, reaching his side. "Sit down—"

His wide eyes swing to meet hers. For a moment, Dorcas thinks he's going to hit her. He stares.

"Please," Dorcas says. "Sit."

Very slowly, Moody takes a seat at the table. Dorcas kneels beside him and raises her wand.

"Reparo," she starts to say, and shakes herself. Moody is many things, and she is many things. Neither of them are James.

Moody looks at her like she's gone mad. "Wrong spell yourself, girl," he says. His left eye has gone unfocused, drifting off in the wrong direction.

Dorcas grabs his wrist, digging her nails into the pulse point. "Stay with me." She clears her throat. "Vulnera Sanentur."

Piece by piece, his cheek begins to stitch itself back together again. Dorcas has to hold the skin in place with her fingers. She almost throws up but manages to keep it

down until Moody looks human again, at which point she turns away, retching.

“Thank you,” he says gruffly.

Dorcas finishes gagging. “It’ll scar,” she rasps.

Moody nods. “I can do the rest. Help others. *Now*, girl.”

Dorcas clambers to her feet, brushing blood off her hand onto the leg of her trousers. “How many dead?”

He looks from her to the tabletop. “Five. And more if you don’t hurry.”

They lose seven. Eight, if you count one of the muggles, which Dorcas does. Obviously.

They work all through the morning and into the afternoon healing, Dorcas alongside a handful of volunteers floo’d over from Rostock. Lily isn’t among them. She checks diligently, and when she asks one of them, they don’t answer, too busy stitching together the various pieces of Arthur Weasley.

James sits with the muggle girl until she’s healed and obliviated, which is around noon. Someone has covered all of the windows with heavy black fabric and it makes the whole place feel dim and temporal. Stuck in time and unmoving, like some strange, unending nightmare.

He drifts to Dorcas’ side. “You okay?”

“Fine. Help me set his leg,” Dorcas instructs, kneeling over the fourth muggle brought in. Unconscious, thank god.

James obeys. "I'm not good at this," he says.

"Yes you are. You're good with people."

"And not much else." He holds the bone in place while Dorcas splints it. "You've done lots."

"It's not enough."

"You kept your head."

Dorcas raises her wand. "*Ferula*. So did you."

"I thought I was going to lose it for a second there," James admits.

Dorcas nods sharply. "Is McGonagall okay? She was bleeding."

"A bit of falling rubble. The attack was on a... a country club. Only cleaning staff and the owner and his family there, though."

"Ah, shit."

"Yeah."

Dorcas pockets her wand. She pats the muggle man's uninjured leg as if to reassure him, even though he can't feel it. Then she looks at James. "How many saw?"

"We think at least a dozen, not counting the injured ones they took back here."

"All obliterated?"

"No," James says grimly. "We can't track down a few of them, Aves said. They're trying their best, but a handful of

them got away. It'll be hard to find them now, without the gadgets the Ministry's got."

"The death eaters might go after them then. Tie up loose ends."

James gives her a strange look. "They won't care enough to do that. They don't like to get their hands dirty. And honestly, thank Merlin. Better they get away and tell their friends and shit than they die, right?"

"You're right," Dorcas says, and shakes herself. She leans back on her haunches and tries to hold it together. It's the first time she's stopped since the floo opened and hell itself poured out.

James sits back beside her. He rubs his face. He's got a bit of blood on the heel of his hand and it scuffs along the side of his face.

"Fucking cold in here," he says.

"Someone opened a window. When that woman threw up," Dorcas replies.

"Ah."

They look at one another for a moment.

James laughs a bit. He sounds hysterical. "Jesus Christ," he says. "Merlin above." And then he puts his head in his hands.

Tentatively, with great effort, Dorcas puts a hand on his shoulder. "You're alright."

"I know that." He's not shaking anymore. He's very still. "I was going to get more letters today. I was going to catch up."

"I'll help you," Dorcas offers. "Tomorrow." Even though it's a lie, and she knows it's a lie even as she says it. She'll be busy from here on out. Guard duty and, perhaps, combat. If she gets lucky. James will want to come with her if she ends up properly fighting. She wonders how that'll go.

He shakes his head. "I don't know," he says helplessly. "I just don't know."

Dorcas runs a choppy hand over his dark, shaven head and then her own. "Come on. More work still to be done."

"Right." James pulls his face out of his hands. His eyes are very red and very wet. "Right," he says again.

"Right," Dorcas echoes. She stands up and offers him a hand. He takes it.

Marlene,

Tore up your last letter from me. I wouldn't have been able to send it anyway, and I don't think I would've wanted to. I would like to explain everything that happened today, but I don't think I can do it without crying, so you should take it straight from the sharp-toothed maw of the press pulpit; attached to this one is a clipping of this evening's Prophet. 'Senseless attack by muggles on wizarding ancestral home, Liverpool'. They're saying the 'blood war' is getting worse. I don't even know what to say. I've spent the last five minutes trying to come up with a joke and I just can't.

Direct Action again soon. Every week it seems to come too quickly. I like to think you listen to it. I mentioned in the last letter I wrote to you that if you did listen, you'd have heard Mary's name on the deathlist. And I think I sort of felt bad about it then. But now I hope you did. I hope it hurt you. You know that? I hope it broke your heart.

I hate being the one who stayed. The one left behind. Mary's dead and you're running, and you always run. And it's the worst, being the one left alive.

Anyway. My fingers are cramping up. We healed and worked and sat in meetings with the Order for twelve, fourteen hours straight today. James is asleep for once. I can hear his breathing in the dark. I think he needed it. I think I needed it. He's unbearable, but almost everyone is. Big up bonding through trauma, I suppose.

I want to know that you're okay. And I want to know you're not.

- Dorcas.

The following night, James falls asleep before Dorcas again, another rarity. Drifting off to sleep without the incessant sound of his repairing spells is a rarity these days, and Dorcas appreciates the silence, she thinks, as she lies staring at the ceiling. She can hear the centaurs elsewhere in the house, all crushed together, grumbling and hoofing at the ground. Quiet murmurs from downstairs. Snores and crying somewhere. The whole war, confined to this shitty little house.

She's almost asleep when she hears it; James starts to breathe quicker. Quicker. Quicker. Quicker until he's

heaving in and out and in and out like a hummingbird,
dragging in breaths like water.

Dorcas sits up. "James?" she asks into the darkness.

He doesn't reply. His breathing grows faster still, a whine hanging off the end of each pull of air, almost a sob. Each breath rasps, whistling between his teeth.

"James," Dorcas murmurs again. "James. James, come on."

He rolls over. In the dim light, she sees his hand clutch tight around the edge of the stripped mattress, tight enough to dig divots into the flesh of it.

Slowly, Dorcas rolls off her own bed. She shuffles over to sit near, not touching him.

"James," she says. "Wake up."

"No," he murmurs. "Remus."

Dorcas hesitates, then puts an arm on his shoulder. He jumps violently but does not wake up.

"Remus," he mutters again, hard to make out with half of his face slurried against the pillow. "Remus. No."

"You're having a nightmare."

He haggles in a sharp breath. It seems to hurt and he coughs with the force of it, then breathes in again, ragged and gasping. "Remus. Remus. Fuck. No—!"

Dorcas grabs him by both shoulders then, very tightly.
"James, you have to wake up. James!"

He's not breathing properly, not deeply enough to get oxygen to his brain. If he wakes up now, he'll panic more, but it's better than him passing out.

"James!" Dorcas says as loudly as she thinks she can get away with. She leans down close to his ear. "JAMES!"

James startles awake so violently that his head swings up. The side of his jaw cracks into Dorcas' nose and she lurches backwards. In the darkness they stare at one another, James still gasping and hacking.

"I can't breathe—" he wheezes.

Dorcas sighs, crossing her legs in front of her. She holds her nose with one hand reaches out to hold his hand with the other. "Yes you can."

He's still hyperventilating. His wild eyes dart around, looking for an exit. No. Searching for an enemy.

"I can't breathe," he says again. "Hgh. I can't— I can't—"

Still holding his hand tight, Dorcas raises it, pounding James' own fist against his chest, tucked inside her own. "Yes you can. In. Out. In... and out. Breathe with me."

He sucks in great lungfuls of air, curled over and coughing. "My chest."

"Your chest is fine. You just had a nightmare."

James shakes his head. "It's broken," he sobs. "It's broken."

Dorcas grabs him around the face, trapping his hand between hers and his cheek. "Look at me. You're okay. It's

not broken.”

It’s a lie and both of them know it. It doesn’t feel like it fits in the room. This feels too large for them — this, choking on sorry breath, this, heaving in too much of not enough air.

James nods. Not really a nod. More like a prayer. “Yeah,” he says. “Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. ‘Course it’s not broken.”

“That’s it. Breathe.”

They stay like that for a while, James choking. Each breath in evokes a strange noise from his chest, lower than a wheeze. Sort of tonal. A bit horn-ish. Dorcas doesn’t let go of his face. She wants to slap him but thinks it wouldn’t help.

Eventually, he flops back onto the mattress. His breathing is still too quick for his body, but he looks human again. Looks alive again.

“There’s something I need to do,” he murmurs into the darkness.

“Fuck you,” Dorcas replies. She’s so tired that she doesn’t think she could walk if she had to. “What is it?”

James stares at her for a while. One of his hands shuffles to his pillowcase and he rummages around inside and pulls out a wad of tissue paper.

“Don’t unwrap it,” he says. He puts it in the palm of his hand and very slowly, he offers it to her.

Dorcas takes it, turning it over in her hands. There’s something hard and cold inside. “What is this?” she asks.

James watches her still. "Sirius had it," he says. "I... I think it killed his friend. When she put it on."

"Oh."

"In Little Hangleton."

She considers asking him to tell her what happened that night, the whole raw ugly truth of it. Dorcas remembers little of the day herself; only James and Remus dropping them off at Hackney Terrace in the middle of the night, waiting the whole day for news, eavesdropping on conversations they didn't have a right to, and the end of that night, when James staggered into HQ alone and clutching at his chest. Lily and Remus didn't come back with him. He didn't talk for a while.

Dorcas decides against it. "What is it?"

James shakes his head. "Something evil," he whispers.

"I don't believe in evil," Dorcas replies.

"You will," James tells her. "Spend enough time with that thing and you will."

She eyes him. "What do you want from me?"

"I want..." He trails off. "I want lots of things. But I want to destroy this. Most of all."

"If it's Sirius'—"

"He wants it dead too." James blinks, eyes bright. "I saw him. I know he does. It needs to die. I know it. I know it."

Dorcas chews on her lip. She's known fear; she's known it for a year now. She's known stubbornness like his. She

knows it intimately. Mary isn't stubborn, and neither is Marlene; they are a push and pull. They will give way until the smallest straining pressure. But she looks at James and recognises him.

"How?" she asks eventually.

"I've tried the killing curse."

"Jesus Christ."

"It didn't work," James says needlessly.

"Yeah, I figured."

"I was thinking... thinking of another spell. But I need help."

Dorcas blinks. "Which spell?"

James considers her. "Sirius told me about it. In second year. They used it to... well. Pureblood families used to use it to kill blood traitors. Back in the days before Grindelwald cast the divide through blood politics. They said... they said it killed the soul. Burned it out of you."

Dorcas raises an eyebrow. "My family isn't British."

"Neither is mine," James replies, and then catches himself, "was. Neither was mine."

"What's the spell?"

He chews on his thumbnail. Dorcas thinks she sees blood there.

"I need one of those potion bottles they keep in the storage room by the top of the stairs," he murmurs. "One of the

unbreakable ones. Designed for keeping crushed erumpent horn. Flameproof."

"What's your plan?"

"Can you get it for me?"

"What's your plan?" Dorcas asks again, with more force.

"Can you get it for me?" James repeats.

They watch one another.

"Okay," Dorcas says eventually. "You'll owe me forever, you know."

"If we both survive this, I'll get you drinks," James promises.

"Ha."

Never. There's no way in hell they both make it through this. But it's a nice sentiment.

Dorcas stands up. "Stay here."

It feels duplicitous to steal from the Order. Biting the hand and all that crap. Still, Dorcas is good at sneaking around, has learned how to keep herself quiet and still when she needs to be. Hogwarts taught her. Sixth year taught her.

By the time she makes it back to James, flask shoved under her shirt, he's up and dressed with his wand tucked into his belt loop.

"Got it?" he asks, turning around, jacket half on.

“Where are we going?”

He chews the inside of his cheek. “Newhaven. Southeast.”

“Let me get changed,” Dorcas mutters, and tosses him the flask.

James bounces it from hand to hand. As Dorcas pulls on a long-sleeved shirt, he seems to listen hard for a moment, as if checking they won’t be overheard, before rearing his arm back and hurling the flask at the wall as hard as he can. The impact is like gunfire in the quiet. It does not break.

“Bingo,” he murmurs. “I’m going to the bathroom.”

“Wait—” Dorcas calls after him, but he’s already out of the door. She catches him pulling his wand out. He’s taken the flask with him.

When he comes back to her, there is something glowing in the pocket of his jacket. Dorcas opens her mouth to ask and considers that it’s probably pointless.

It’s easy, too easy, to sneak out of headquarters. Dorcas wonders how much she’s willing to throw away for this. It’s freezing outside, far too cold for August. The chill of dementors is never too far away.

“There’s a one-change train to Newhaven out of Paddington,” James tells her as they stride down the street. Without Mary here, Dorcas feels deprived of a limb. “Not a far walk. We can make it to the station before they stop running the trains.”

“Can we?”

“If we run.”

“You can’t.”

James glances askance at her. Then, he picks up his pace to a jog, and then to a run.

“Oh, fuck off,” Dorcas sighs, and sprints after him.

They make it to Paddington station before midnight.

“One last train tonight,” James gasps, panting, as they jog bow-legged down the steps into the station, which is too brightly lit for London, it feels. The brittle darkness outside looms behind them, obscuring the pedestrian entrance, lights blinking faintly from the other side of the road.

“Yeah?” Dorcas confirms. “We won’t get back ’til morning.”

“We can tell them we went for a walk.”

She glances around at the mostly-empty station. The muggles must know what’s good for them. Nobody’s out tonight. “And they’ll definitely believe that.”

“You know me,” James says. “I’m a good liar.”

Dorcas laughs a bit, and then laughs more. A full belly-thick roar of it. “You’ve developed a sense of humour since school, you know.”

“Funny. Thought I’d lost it.”

“Nah. Your jokes used to be shit.”

James reaches the turnstile and glances around. “Well,” he says to her, “I’m fitting in a lifetime of good humour now. Just in case.” And he vaults clean over it.

They don't talk on the train ride over. Dorcas' heart sets a pace too fast for comfort, the base rate elevated. She feels like she should be fighting. She feels like she should be sweating. She is doing neither.

James stares out of the dark window the whole time, as if trying to find something out there. They make it out of London and start over the winding overground leading south. The distant, ghostly lights of far-off towns blink on the horizon, small ghosts, other lives. None of them know what's coming. It must be blissful.

They make it to the end of the line and get off there. James seems to know the small town they end up in, twenty mile off Newhaven and clinging to the coast, flung far enough east that Greenwich's heavy line striking up through the country must feel like poison. Morning must come too late here, and evening too.

"It's up this way," he says. "As far from the town as we can get."

"You've been here before?" Dorcas asks, as they trek away from the train station, towards the edge of the town. Dark hills rise high beyond it, rolling. Thick with crops. Summertime has survived here, but it won't for long; it's too close to London.

"Yeah," James murmurs, a bit wistful. "A few times. With Remus."

"Oh."

He chews on his lip. "Been almost five months and I still think of him when the moon..."

In Gryffindor tower, Lupin's lycanthropy was a bit of an open secret. Still, Dorcas has never heard anyone address it out loud before.

"With the wolves now, isn't he?" she asks. "South Wales. With a pack."

"Doing diplomacy for the Order. Hasn't been in contact much." James picks at a scab on his knuckle and turns off the main road onto a path winding up into a patch of forest. "This way. He sent one letter."

"One?"

"Two months ago, almost three."

"Jesus."

"Said he was alive and working on getting through to the pack leaders. Said he's alright. That's it."

"He didn't say anything to you either?"

"No need to rub it in," James mutters. He hovers a hand over the pocket of his jacket, the glowing something sitting inside of it casting a very faint glow over the ground through the canvas. His hand rises to his throat. "This scarf, he made it for me."

"Did he? It's nice."

"Don't say things you don't mean," he snorts.

Dorcas laughs. "It's a bit ratty."

James shrugs. "I like to wear it sometimes. When I think I can handle it." He pulls the tassels tight and whips one of the ends over his shoulder and around his neck another

loop, burying his chin in the knitted fabric. "I imagine it still smells like him sometimes, even though it doesn't anymore."

"You've got it bad."

"I see you writing letters."

"I've got it bad too," Dorcas admits.

"For Marlene?"

"And Mary. Before."

"Ah, shit. I mean, I knew, but. Worse when you say it out loud, isn't it?"

Dorcas shrugs, stepping over a fallen branch. Darkness has swollen around them. The impenetrable black night swoops low overhead, casting the branches of the trees into strange, grasping limbs. Black hands.

"Why did you shave your head?" she asks.

"I didn't shave it properly," James protests. "There's still a bit there. It's like a crewcut."

"Why?" she presses.

"A pact. Lily and I." James shrugs. "I didn't want to keep seeing myself in the mirror anymore."

Dorcas can relate. She remembers how it felt to see herself with no hair for the first time. The stranger staring back at her had looked more soldier than human.

"I hate being the only one left," he murmurs. "I hate it."

Dorcas pats him on the arm. "Me too," she says. "It's bloody awful. C'mon."

They don't talk the rest of the way. James leads her up and out of the scraggly green copse and to the top of a high knoll of fields, bisected by a long tractor path. By darkness, they trudge through the damp mud, the wind milder out here. The black ocean blinks at them on one side, heavy mist and the distant lights of Newhaven further down the coast. It smells awful. Dorcas idealised the English countryside a lot as a kid. But now it, like most things, has proven to be disappointingly average in practice.

The walking lasts for what feels like hours, until she's sure it must be two or three in the morning. James doesn't seem to get tired. He knows the path well. He can't stop staring at the ocean. Like he's looking at the English Channel and seeing something else.

By the time they reach his desired spot, Dorcas' feet are aching. James pulls to a halt in the middle of a broad field of yellow flowers, sitting in rows leading to the ocean.

"Okay," he says. "We've got to be, what, four miles from any town?"

"There or thereabouts," Dorcas agrees. She watches him in the darkness. "What's this about?"

James scuffs a foot in the dirt trail under them. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out the flask. Inside, a bright, near-white something curls and writhes within the glass, lashing and blistering. It's too stark to look at and Dorcas has to glance away.

"What did you make?" she asks, watching the ocean.

He tosses the flask from one hand to the other. "A mistake," he tells her.

Dorcas fishes in her pocket for the wrapped ring. She hands it to him. James takes it and lays it on the ground at his feet, the small white package bright in the darkness, under the undulating light of the flask.

He draws a deep breath and lets it out. Pounds at his chest once and coughs.

"What are you going to do?" Dorcas asks.

James looks at her. "Step back?"

She tilts her head to the side. "No."

And he nods, looking a bit perplexed.

"Okay," he says.

Thunder rumbles in the distance, though it isn't raining. The air seems to still, stopping in place. Dorcas shuffles close enough to James that their shoulders press tightly together.

James uncorks the flask and drops it to the ground beside the ring.

Fire. It's fire, so hot it's white and blue rather than orange. It lashes in a tendril from the flask and skitters across the ground until it finds the ring. The whole small package bursts into flame.

"Oh no," Dorcas says faintly.

Sparks spit from it; the ring screams. But it's too quiet to stab through the sound of burning. Heat rushes in a wave

from the ground up into their faces. It makes Dorcas' eyes burn.

She swallows hard and does not step back. Her boldness has outgrown itself. It's going to eat her alive. "That's fiendfyre, isn't it?"

"I told you," James mutters. "A mistake."

She grabs his arm. "We have to run."

The fire is already spreading. It digs hot tendrils into the earth and the dust pops and scorches with heat. Tendrils of smoke rise against the night and already the flame is two feet tall, three. Spreading out like a plague. The leaves and the mud begin to enkindle with it.

James steps back, still watching it. "Do you think it's dead?"

"Yes," Dorcas says, not knowing for sure.

"Oh, fuck," James murmurs. *What have I done*, his shaking hands say.

Then, he turns and sprints in the other direction, back towards the small town cursed by Greenwich, towards the lights of Newhaven, winking, small ghosts, small lives.

Dorcas doesn't hesitate; she tears right after him.

The fire is oddly soundless at distance. Perhaps the wind. Perhaps adrenaline. It crackles behind them the first ten paces, twenty. By thirty it's silent, too far away to hear. The world goes quiet. Dorcas runs, the only sounds her own footsteps and James' up ahead, and both of their frantic breaths, James' wheezing. The crunch crunch crunch of rocks and mud and stuff under their feet. The brushing of

their clothes in the silence. The clicking of tired bones, tender and destructive.

They run without stopping until the firelight does not distend their shadows in front of them — they run until James can't run anymore, hurtling to a stop, a staggering stop, it takes his legs out. He hits the ground on both knees, buh-duh.

"Fuck!" he yells. "It hurts!"

Dorcas grabs him under the arms and drags him up. His feet lurch heavy over the ground and he leans back against her and then forwards, almost keeling, moving in stuttering steps. They run like that, half leaning on each other, further still. The smell of fire on the wind dies. No more smoke. No more sound.

"Don't turn around," Dorcas pants. "No matter what. Don't turn around. Let's just get back to the town."

James stares at her, then nods. They run the rest of the way down to the copse and once inside the treeline, they both stagger to a stop, not turning around, panting.

Neither speaks for a long time. James staggers to a tree and leans against it with both hands, sweat dripping into his eyes. Dorcas crouches down, legs bent, elbows on her knees, huffing in lungfuls of cold, clean air.

The wind goes quieter. It cannot reach them here. The earthy smell of the forest feels deceptive.

"What did we do?" James heaves.

Dorcas shakes her head. "No," she says. "What did *you* do?"

"I thought it would work...!"

"It did work." She looks up at him. "It did. But did you not think of a plan for what would happen next?"

"No," James admits.

Dorcas laughs derisively, right in the back of her throat. "Lily was right about you," she snaps.

"I thought... I thought..."

"You didn't think!"

James' eyes stab her through the darkness. "Nobody can know. Nobody can know it was us."

Dorcas stands up straight and throws her arms up in the air in frustration. She gestures frantically at James, feeling mad, feeling crazed. "Some fucking ring, and you— you— you didn't tell me it was this! You didn't tell me you were making me into an arsonist— fiendfyre in Newhaven— you fucking asshole, I hate you, I hate you, I hate you—"

"I had to get it gone! I had to kill it!"

"No, you had to kill *something*! You didn't care what!"

James straightens up and moves to shove her, trembling hands rising. Dorcas shoves him first and he staggers into the underbrush, yelping. She advances on him, to do what, she isn't sure. Kick him in the face maybe, or sink down beside him and tell him she hates him. To check on his injured chest.

A twig cracks underfoot and Dorcas lifts her head and notices for the first time that the forest is very, very quiet.

"What—" James says, staring up at her with big eyes.

Dorcas puts a finger over her mouth. A prickle runs along the back of her neck like a drifting hand. She stares up through the dark boughs of the trees, looking for movement in the shadows.

"No birds," she whispers. "You hear that? No birds."

And it's true. There isn't a single bird left in the whole copse. They have all flown away. They can smell it, like elephants can smell earthquakes, like storks can smell tsunamis.

"Shit," Dorcas breathes. "Oh, fuck."

James clammers to his feet. He brushes past her, back to the treeline, to peer up to the top of the knoll, to the tractor trail leading into the high, deep fields. His footsteps falter in the wet dirt, stammering there.

Dorcas steels herself and turns too, following him. The night air whips her face and she smells it again. Smoke. The trees open up before her. She stands at his side.

In the distance, the fire is five or six feet high, a great bright mass on the horizon. At least half a dozen feet wide and cracking so bright that it is like a second sun, so bright that it blurs and flares the vision. Old film. Decaying.

"How did you know the flask would hold the fiendfyre?" she asks breathlessly.

James doesn't look at her. "I didn't," he says.

Chapter End Notes

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MERTHYR

Chapter Notes

short king chapter today! dedicated to shayna the short king of my heart <3

warnings: mild injury, trauma, mental illness

enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

He travels by nightfall down to the coast, taking the train out of the valleys through the decaying husks of mining towns and farming villages gone septic with poverty. Out of Merthyr and down through Blaenavon, into Bridgend station and then out of the boxcar into the cold, dark night, which pokes holes in his ragged clothing. It hurts, but not like the stares do. Remus has never felt like a stranger in his own home before. He supposes that even after all of this time, the bit of him that changed with London has stuck.

It's a wonder they let him go. It's been months; it feels like he's been back for as long as he was gone, longer. Soon he might've been. But trust is hard to come by, the second rarest commodity traded in wartime, coming close behind time. Still, tonight, when Remus asked if he could take the night to travel to his old home, to see, to know, they said yes. He supposes he should be thankful for that, he thinks, as he steps out of the train station and into the town, hill sloping downwards into a cluster of shops. The old bridge is near here, and it steeples over the rushing river, and he thinks he would like to see it.

The dementors are always hovering in Merthyr, never far away. They're not in Bridgend, though. The only shadows here are in people's faces. Scarcity has whittled heavy lines into the mortar of buildings. A piece of roof sits in the road as Remus passes. Nobody has picked it up and in the centre it has begun to sink with age and rain. He sees a rat and thinks of Peter, and then of Sirius, and then of James, and that single-handedly ruins his night.

Rain begins to pick. Remus makes it to the old bridge and stands on it for a while, elbows crossed atop the stone wall, watching the dark water rushing below. Cold wind whips at his cheeks. The cloak is a heavy, cold mass against his ribs, colder with the passing of hours. There's a group of teens getting high underneath the high stone footway. The brightness of their laughter and their lighters casts a warm glow over the rippling rapids. Remus is almost tempted to climb the fence to the steps leading down to the riverbed. Almost tempted to sit with them, to ask for a hit. He doesn't.

The bus station is still open. Remus buys a ticket to Ogmore-By-Sea and rides down in silence, not thinking of much. It was August's full a few days ago, the month dying a slow, silent death. Summer is almost over. He still aches with it. It's easier with the pack, but not as easy as it was at Hogwarts, James and Sirius and Peter all there. Their presences set the wolf at ease, took the predator out of it. The pack makes the predator in him louder.

Ogmore-By-Sea is dark and blustery. The ocean is a great, black monolith, the waves obscured in shadow. Remus walks all the way to Southerndown and then to the ocean, down through the hills, down a one-lane country road to the seaside, thick with tar drifted down from Porthcawl Beach,

flooded with pebbles and chunks of concrete from Somerset.

Once there, Remus sits down on the seawall and breathes in the heavy smell of salt. In, out. In, out. He is not one to dwell on the past — he never has been and he doubts he ever will be — but if anywhere in the world can make him nostalgic for something he has lost, it's this place, Dunraven Castle not far away, its dark shape nestled into the hillside, visible from here. A testament to a world lost, a whole history shuttled to the side.

Remus curses under his breath. "Look at you," he murmurs to himself. "Look at what you're doing."

"I thought you might come here," says a voice from behind him.

Remus startles but does not turn around. "They sent you after me."

"Of course they didn't. They don't want to scare you off. I'm fine with scarin' you, though, mush."

"You came on your own?"

"Always liked this bit of the world." Huw sits down on the wall beside him, legs swinging. "We came to Dunraven on a school trip when I was younger. We saw the tower but they didn't let us go in."

"We could go in now," Remus offers. "It's open to the public."

"Maybe."

They sit in silence for a moment. Remus looks from the ocean to Huw, briefly, and then back out again.

"We went to the Big Pit on trips when I was a kid," he offers. "Drove us up to Blaenavon in a big bus."

"We made spectacles of each other, din'we?"

"Suppose we did." Remus fiddles with his sleeve. "I remember it. Really clearly, actually. It was before Hogwarts. They took us down the shaft in this big lift. The dark world closing around us, a different universe. I remember it."

"My da works there. Fourteen hour days."

"Yeah. My uncle used to."

"He died?"

Remus nods. "Lung cancer."

"Condolences."

He shrugs. "Happens to most of us. Losing someone like that."

"Suppose so. I've lost three uncles. Da's one of seven, though, so maybe that's good odds." Huw glances across at him, shoulders curled. He's got awful posture. "You don't talk about Hogwarts very much."

"It was nice."

"You wizarding people and your castle. They used to tell us stories about it when we were young. Always hoped I'd get my letter."

“You would’ve been a Gryffindor,” Remus tells him. “You would’ve been in my dorm.”

“That’s nice.”

“Yeah.”

“Bloody freezin’ out’ere.”

“I know.” Remus shrugs out of his jacket and gives it to Huw. “Take it, Jones.”

Huw nods his head at him. “Diolch.”

Whenever anybody speaks Welsh, it makes Remus feel funny. Like he’s done something wrong. He understands half of it most of the time, the bits that matter, but it still makes him feel like a fraud. Something who doesn’t belong here.

“You’re thinking,” Huw says. “I can hear your brain going.”

“I’m thinking about how we should get food before we go back. From that greasy spoon place on the way back up through Ewenny. On the side of the hill.”

“Never been.”

Remus shrugs, shivering. “It’s shit. Cheap, though.”

Huw snorts. “Just like us.”

“Exactly. Come with me?”

“How long are you staying down here?”

“I wanted to watch the sunrise.”

"We'll freeze, Lupin."

"You'll freeze," Remus says contemptuously. "I'm made of stronger stuff."

"You?" Huw laughs heartily, slapping Remus on the back. "Stronger stuff? Give me a break. Hogwarts and London, real stronger stuff. You're funny."

"Ah, shut it. At least I didn't spend half my childhood with Efa breathing down my neck."

"Oi. Efa loves me."

"She shelters you."

"*Because* she loves me," Huw contends. "You know, I think she's liked you a lot more recently too, I really do. She's warming up to you."

"Right. Totally. I can feel it in her glowering stares over breakfast every morning."

He shoves Remus. "I mean it. The other night, she was talking to Dylis about it, how she thinks you're not all that bad. I think it's just because you've been staying with us this long and the Order hasn't come knocking yet."

Remus glances away. "Well, she gave me her blessing to come down here alone tonight. Alone being the operative word."

"Look, she seriously didn't send me."

"I know that."

"You don't trust it."

"I don't trust most things," Remus dismisses. "Let alone you."

Huw is quiet for a while. "I still wait for them to turn up, you know," he says. "The Order. I still wait for them to come knocking on our door one of these days. And I know you promised it wouldn't happen, but I still don't believe you, you know that, Lupin?"

Remus nods. He raises a hand to wipe his nose. "I figured."

"And even though it's been five months I still feel the same as I did when you first arrived."

"You like me more now," Remus protests.

Huw laughs tiredly. "I suppose I do." He glances at him. "It's getting worse out there."

Remus thinks of James, of how he hasn't made it onto the deathlist yet but any day now he might. Of Mary, lost on a mission, her cause of death not named, because airtime is expensive and death is cheap.

"I know," he says. "You listen to 'Direct Action'?"

"No."

"Fair, that."

Huw shrugs a shoulder. "It reminds me that we're running out of time, it does."

Remus chews on that for a while. "You really feel that way?"

"Yes."

“Oh. If it helps, I do, too.”

“Of course you do.” Huw turns amber eyes on him. “You’re one of us. We’re all running out of time, always have been.”

Remus pulls a pack of fags out of his jacket and lights one. He holds it out to Huw. “Peace offering.”

Huw takes it, pulling a long lungful. Smoke curls in tendrils out around his scarred lips. “Cheers, butt.”

“Cheers,” Remus mumbles. Then, “I meant it. We can go to the castle if you want. It’s ten minutes that way. Look, you can see it from here.”

Huw looks up at him. He offers Remus the cigarette. Remus takes it and takes a drag.

“They’re going to send you away soon,” Huw murmurs. “Christ. I should shut my mouth.”

Remus looks at the ground, at the stones and concrete. Strips of dark seaweed stripe the spotty earth. “Thought you said they trusted me?”

“They do. But it’s not just about trust. They want you to commit.”

“Send me away where?”

Huw chews the inside of his cheek. “I should keep my mouth shut,” he says again. “Christ.”

“You’re my friend.”

“And a fat lot of good that’ll do me, when the war arrives.”

Remus grabs his arm and squeezes very tight. "Where?" he asks again.

"I don't know. Somewhere out of the country."

His heart clenches. He desperately hates the idea of leaving Wales right now. "What?"

"I told you. They want commitment."

"Commitment to what?"

Huw takes the cigarette back off him and takes a puff. "They want to know," he says, coughing, "how far you're willing to go."

"Are they going to ask me to do something?"

"Probably. And you'll fail."

"Hey—"

Huw shoots him a look. "And that'll be the point," he carries on, handing the fag back.

Remus takes it between two fingers, tapping it against his thumb to get the ash off the end. He takes another pull. "Will it?"

"If they know you'll go on a doomed mission for them, they know you'll go anywhere."

Remus considers that. "I've been honest with them and they know it. Told them I'm with the Order. Told them I'm magical. Told them everything."

"None of us are lying anymore," Huw sighs. "Not them, not you. Certainly not me. I'm shit at it." He breathes in the

smell of the sea air.

“Then why send me?”

“Because this isn’t about truth.” Huw stands up, looking down at him. He takes the cigarette and tosses it at the ocean. Its small, orange light flits through the air and hisses against a wet stone.

“Then what is it about?” Remus asks.

He shakes his head. “What is every war about?”

“Power,” Remus says immediately.

“Nah.” Huw stretches his arms high above his head, dreadlocks fluttering back off his shoulders with the wind. “Sacrifices.”

He turns and starts off towards Dunraven castle, along the path stretching beside the sea wall. Remus stares after him, unsure whether he’s supposed to follow. Far away. They’re sending him far away. If James catches wind of it, he’ll... he’ll...

“Come on!” Huw calls over his shoulder. “I want to see this bloody tower! This is the first step in making peace with my deprived childhood! Hurry up!”

Remus stands up, climbing back over the wall. “Big Pit next?”

“You know it, butt.” He laughs into the wind, not looking back at Remus. “Down into that dark world... that different universe...”

Dear Lily,

Hello! It's been about a month since I wrote, I'm sorry about that. I've been properly getting into a routine here, and I think if I send too many letters they might start to get suspicious that I'm feeding information to the Order. I haven't written to the Order at all since the start of the summer. I wonder how long it'll be until they send someone to find me? And now I'm thinking about it, oh Merlin. It'll be uncomfortable for everyone involved if they send James. I haven't sent HIM anything since... since.

Doesn't need saying does it? They've started calling it the New War — are they doing that in Germany too? It's a bad name for it. But I think making the distinction is important. Things have changed a lot since I left England. Since I ended up back here, more people are on the deathlist every week. Gambit sounds terrible, doesn't she? It's just not the same now that it's her on her own.

I don't know when I'll get to send this. It might be after we've seen each other in September, and if so, I suppose all of the niceties will be quite pointless. It's not far-off now, is it? When the Order reached out and told me what the plan is I almost considered telling them no. But I'm not good at telling people no. You know that.

And I know you said you'd be there too, but I wonder sometimes if you'll turn up. Didn't part on good terms, did we? Not me and you. We're okay. I think. But us as a unit. I think of the look on James' face a lot as he asked us to come back to HQ with him. I think of how he cried when you said you wouldn't. Do you think of it too?

This has gotten strange. I'm sorry for reminding you of it, if it's upset you. Feel free to ignore my questions. They're

almost all hypothetical anyway, and they don't need answering.

Things here are okay. Okay is a good word for it. I'm okay, stable and the like, keeping my feet on the ground. I've made some proper connections. Huw Jones — I told you about him in my last letter — is wonderful, mostly because I'd never met someone who was gay and welsh and a werewolf all at the same time before. Aside from myself. And I've never been quite sure I properly existed as those things. It's odd isn't it? Being more than one Thing. I guess you understand it too. Have you been letting your hair grow out? I like to think that you haven't. I like to think that it's as short as it was when we left. But what do I know?

Out in fair Europe, I suppose you've heard neither hide nor hair of Sirius? You would've written if you had. But I still have to ask. I know Europe is big but it all blurs into one big mass in my head. All of you running around out there. I imagine that you'll bump into him at a bus stop or something. Stupid idea, isn't it? Does Germany have those? Bus stops, I mean, not stupid ideas.

The August moon went well — the pack makes things easier. The wolf likes being around its own kind. Two weeks until the big day, less now. I wonder sometimes if James will be there. The Order would send him on a job like that, wouldn't they? He's their errand boy now. Not Sirius'.

And I can't stop making it about them. Every letter goes like this, doesn't it? It must annoy you.

I have to ask, though: are you anxious you'll see Snape out there?

Write back. Stay safe out there, and remember we love you.

- Remus Lupin.

PS: did you hear about the fire in Newhaven?

"We need to make repairs on the fencing around the west end of the territory," Efa tells Remus. "Come on, you're coming with me."

It's the morning after they got back from Southerndown, he and Huw. Remus looks up from his toast. "What?"

"I said you're coming with me to repair our fencing." She looks down at him, raising a dark eyebrow. "Some teenagers living nearby strung up a dead fox across them. The wire was broken on the full."

"Why a fox?"

"You know what they think of us," Huw puts in, sitting cross-legged on the floor beside Remus. "Creatures from out the mines, and that. Crawled out in the war. We're urban-legendary."

"That's not a phrase," Remus says.

"And we're not urban," Efa finishes. She claps a great hand on Remus' shoulder. "Up and with me, then. Now in a minute."

"Yeah," Remus says quickly. He stands up, brushing his trousers off. "You can finish my toast."

Huw grins up at him; it malforms a long scar along his dark cheek. "Would've done it without your permission. Thanks, Lupin."

"I've told you to call me Remus."

"Yet you still call me Jones."

"I'm keeping a healthy distance so I don't get emotionally attached."

Huw kicks him in the shin. "Fuckoff."

Remus shakes his head. "Tell Lynn I said hello when she wakes up."

"That'll be past noon. You'll be back by then."

"We'll be back past nightfall if you don't hurry up," Efa calls from the doorway. "Come on, Lupin."

Remus pads across the room to the door and pulls his boots on where they're rested against the wall with dozens of other pairs. A few wolves wave to him but most ignore him, sitting in small clumps around the table or on the floor, speaking in low voices.

It's cold outside, overcast and grey. The dementors are such a constant presence that Remus can hear Sirius almost all of the time now, very faintly like a ringing in his ear. James saying, *you're going?!* and Sirius saying, *only for now, if he wanted me before he'll want me even more now—*

Efa strides off down the path from the warren. "Come on," she calls over her shoulder to him, strawish blonde hair in need of another coat of bleach. "Quickly now."

Remus jogs to catch up. He feels a joint in his knee click and studiously ignores it. "Coming." He reaches her side. "How far out is it?"

"Two miles. Close enough to the edge of the valley to see Ffos-y-fran."

"Oh." Remus shudders a bit. He hates that mine, hates how the harsh divide where the land reclamation scheme begins casts brown strips into the green grass before the shaft entrances, which loom dark under heavy pulleys of steel. He wants to ask her, *why did you pick me?* and decides against it.

Efa is pushing sixty-five, broad and heavy-footed, with a very no-nonsense sort of tone and ruddy features and a wide neck. She was born and raised in the valleys and has seen two wars, a werewolf for both of them, a werewolf since she was five. A muggle werewolf at that. She's run the warren since she was in her mid-twenties.

Remus has never in his life met someone he is more afraid of than her.

It's sort of fascinating. Of all of the things that might have shaken his bravery, it's a rough-hewn Welshwoman, mercury-footed, fast-speaking with a voice too loud. He's not a brave person, but the war has made him hard, and the New War has made him acutely aware of the passing of time in a way you can only be if you're afraid of death. Remus knows her type. Scariest people in the world, after Dark Lords when they're angry and James Potter when he's sad.

"Shit weather today," Remus says.

She glances at him. "Language."

“Sorry.”

“It’s fine.” Efa’s hands fidget endlessly at her sides and she clicks the joints in and out with firm force. She’s got bad arthritis from years of transformations, like most of the members of the warren over forty. Remus will too someday, provided he makes it to that age. Most don’t.

“How much work is it?” he asks.

“A few hours.”

“Right. Well, I’m not good with this sort of thing,” Remus warns.

“Don’t worry. I’ll just be needing you to keep the fence upright while I work.”

“Muggle teens? Seriously?”

“Aye.”

Remus looks up ahead, up the road. The grey morning sky is blurred with rain on the horizon, past the vast green curve of the valley winding down towards the ocean. Mist hangs low, in whiteish sheets that obscure the river far below the town, the blue estuary, the heavy brown logs drifting downstream towards a distant reservoir.

“You don’t think it was death eaters?” he asks.

“From what I know of wizards,” Efa snorts, “I don’t think they would’ve stopped at a torn bit of fencing. And Dylis had some cuts along the side of their mouth after the full. They reckon they’re the one that did it. Bait.”

“The muggles know the pack is here then?”

"The young ones speculate. Their parents don't believe them."

"And when they grow up?"

"They don't believe their kids about it," Efa replies. "You've never lived with a pack before, have you?"

"Never knew they existed, until Hogwarts," Remus admits. "I spent most of the fulls as a kid in a cage. Grew up in Southerndown. Near Bridgend. Porthcawl way, right on the coast. The only werewolf my family had ever known. My dad used to hunt them for the Ministry, before me."

"Ah."

"It wasn't easy."

"I assumed," Efa replies dryly. "We get kids like that occasionally. Turned years ago, never knew what transformations were like with others there."

"I had company at Hogwarts."

"Other wolves?"

"No."

Efa seems to understand that that's about as far as Remus is going to elaborate on that. "Right," she says. "Have moons been good to you here? The pack likes you well enough on fulls. No fighting that I've seen."

Huw bit him the first moon he spent here, so hard that it still hasn't healed properly. Remus is going to have the scar for some time yet.

"They've been good," he lies. "I was worried I wouldn't fit into the... the pack dynamic."

"I was too."

"Because you don't trust me."

Efa steps heavily over a fallen branch, crunching down on the cracked road. Her shoes are very old and need replacing. They've started to split along the sides.

"Yes," she admits. "And it was hard to believe you when you said you weren't leading them to us."

"Them? I'm with the Order, not the death eaters."

"To us, the difference becomes less every year."

"One group would have you killed."

Efa looks at him. "Which?"

Point taken. Remus is the first to break eye-contact. "They took me in," he tries.

"Because you're magical."

"Because I'm useful."

"Same thing."

"You're useful," Remus protests. "So is Huw. He's wicked smart. Told me all about how he wants to be a mechanic someday. Wants to work for some big car-making firm. Has he told you about that? He's got it all planned out."

"He'll never make it out of Wales," Efa dismisses.

Remus opens his mouth to reply and then closes it.
“Maybe... maybe after the war...”

Efa hums. “I’m going to ask you a question,” she says, looking up into the cold grey sky. A bird of prey hovers overhead, flying east. “And I want you to answer honestly.”

Remus sighs. His breath fogs. Sirius is screaming in the back of his mind. *Claude!*

“Okay,” he agrees.

“When do you think the war will end?”

He considers that. “A couple of years at most,” he says.

“I thought we said honestly?”

“That’s what I think.”

Efa laughs. She pulls a cigarette packet out of her jacket. It’s empty - she spins it on one finger absently. “So *how* do you think it’ll end?”

“We’ll kill Voldemort.”

“And the world will go back to normal?”

“Yes.”

Efa sighs. She stops there, standing in the middle of the path. Remus stops too.

“This is what I don’t like about you, Lupin,” she says. “You want us to help the Order so things can go back to normal.”

Remus eyes her and says nothing.

“What do you think normal is for us?”

He answers immediately. “A world where Voldemort isn’t trying to domesticate us like animals.”

“You mean a world where the magical Ministry leaves us to die, jobless? Treats us like something poisonous?”

“We can fix that once he’s gone,” Remus protests. “We can’t while he’s here.”

“It’s not about whether you can,” Efa replies with finality. “It’s about whether you will.” She sets off again. “And unless you have anything more educated to say on the topic, we should cut this short here. I’ve had quite enough of wizards.”

Fixing the fence takes hours. Remus holds it up while Efa hammers new nails into the side to wrap the barbed wire around tightly. The pack’s territory is four miles wide, a swathe of fields and a cluster of overgrown trees on the poor(er) side of the valley. Once the wire is secure enough to hold the fallen posts up, they need to hammer them back into the ground, an incremental task with how soupy the ground is. Remus is not good with physical work; he’s the weakest person he knows. Lily would be great at this stuff. Even James would do better than him, and James is a chronically malnourished twig.

Peter would like it out here, Remus finds himself thinking as he hammers the post into the ground, peering around at the white-misted moors. It’s quiet. He always did like the quiet; you would have expected Sirius to be the one who jumped at loud noises, but it was Peter. Remus thinks of him

startlingly often recently. He isn't sure why. Perhaps because of what's coming at the beginning of September.

"There's a letter I need to send," he tells Efa as they make their way back to the warren. "Uh. If that's alright."

She gives him a searching look. "To who?"

"I've got a friend in Germany. She works at the Rostock Sanctuary."

"I see."

"I write to her as much as I can. She worries otherwise." It's not quite a lie, but it's certainly not true.

Efa nods. "You can go down tonight, into town. Take Huw. Don't make detours."

"I know it's dangerous. I came from London."

"How long were you there?"

"Seven months. My dad kicked me out. I was with friends though," Remus says quickly. "Two of them. One's still in London, the other, she's in Rostock."

Efa hums. "Do you miss them?"

"Every day."

She nods approvingly. "Then don't take risks while you send that. You wouldn't want it not to get to her. Is she a girlfriend?"

Remus laughs in the back of his throat. "No." And again, it's not a lie, but even now some part of him is sure they're all a bit in love with each other, or they were. Whatever kept

them together for all that time, Lambeth windy and pale with winter outside of their windows, it was strong enough that it held for all that time. That's a type of love, or that's what he tells himself so he can sleep at night.

"Ah." Efa laughs. "Wizards."

"Not just wizards. Huw," Remus protests. "And Dylis. And--"

"Me."

"Er. It's an odd ratio," Remus admits, fumbling awkwardly, trying not to laugh. "Feels disproportionate."

Efa rolls her amberish eyes. She turns to look at him, scanning him up and down.

"You'll be leaving at the beginning of next month, won't you?" she asks.

Remus stops in his tracks. She carries on a few paces, then stops, turning to look at him.

"How did you know that?" Remus stammers.

Efa closes her eyes. "I know what happens at the beginning of September," she says. "We heard about it last year, too. Will you be gone long?"

"A day or two, probably."

"Good. Will you be giving them information on us?"

"Not if you don't want me to," Remus says truthfully.

"Were you planning on asking me?"

"Yes," he lies.

Efa peers at him. She walks one, two, three paces towards him until she's standing right in front of him. She's a few inches taller than Remus, who is already lanky enough that he towers over most of his friends. She manages to make him feel very small.

"When you get back," she says, "I have a job for you to do. If you'd like."

"Yes," Remus replies immediately. "Yes, of course I would."

She nods approvingly. "Then get back." She reaches out to put a hand on the top of his head and wrangles it back and forth a bit, though enough that Remus almost stumbles. There is no affection in the pack that isn't like this; callous in a very familiar way. Remus is only now learning how to like it.

"I will," he promises.

Efa lets him go. "Come." She starts off towards the warren again, which sits against the hillside in the distance, windows bright in the dull afternoon.

Remus follows her. "You said this place has been here since the thirties," he says. "How many people were there then?"

Efa seems to count in her head. "A dozen, perhaps a little less than that."

"Wow. Must have felt spacious."

"It was mostly draft-dodgers, wolves who wanted to avoid National Service. We couldn't exactly go to the commissioners and tell them we should be excused due to lycanthropic chronic illness."

Remus grimaces. Being sent into a muggle war would kill him, he knows that for sure. A week out of commission every month and constant exhaustion. Sickness that never properly goes away.

“You hid them then?”

“As best I could. Most Welsh boys never came back anyway. Wolves would’ve lasted two days out there.” Efa’s eyes have gone hazy with memory. “Most of the time, the Army wouldn’t even send telegrams to notify deaths here. Not to South Wales. There are still whole fields of them, France and Germany. Our soldiers with their skulls in the earth. Never exhumed. But you know that.”

Remus grew up hearing this. Sometimes grief is national, he thinks; sometimes you are born with it and it hangs over you like illness for as long as you live. He has heard this story from relatives, poets, teachers. It isn’t unfamiliar.

“You kept some of your own safe, though,” he says.

“Not enough.”

“Only Welsh wolves?”

“At first. There are more of us than English ones. More muggle wolves, anyway.”

“Why?”

She raises an eyebrow. “Look around. Lots of kids whose schools wouldn’t miss them. Did yours miss you?”

They didn’t call when Remus missed school for days after moons. Too busy dealing with power cuts and mine

collapses, and rubbish bags building up in the streets, their stench so thick it never went away.

“No,” he admits.

They walk the rest of the way in silence.

Lily,

I'm adding this extra note because I've just found out I get to deliver this tonight. It'll take a few weeks to get to you, but we'll manage, right? I don't know if you'll get it before September, but here's to hoping.

I just wanted to let you know, in case I don't see you there, the wolves want me to go on a job afterwards. Probably out of Wales; potentially out of Britain. If I can stop by and say hello, I might. I've been told it's a doomed mission. A test. It's all a doomed mission though, all of it. All of this. That's pessimistic, isn't it? I'm sorry.

Anyway, I just wanted to let you know that. Take care of yourself Lils.

- Remus.

“You heard about Old Magic London, or whatever?” Huw asks, with cheer that does not suit the subject matter.

“It's been all over ‘Direct Action’,” Remus replies. “Of course I heard about it.”

“Just checking.” Huw glances at him. “I'm guessing that's not good news.”

“Does it sound like good news to you?”

“I don’t think them going out and murdering innocent people sounds very fair,” Huw replies considerately.

“Did they announce it as murder on muggle news?”

“They didn’t announce it at all on the news,” Huw replies. He scuffs at a stone with the toe of his boot and it goes rolling down the hillside ahead of them. They’re about halfway down to civilization. The walk back is going to be murder. Already, the chill of dementors is getting stronger. Merthyr sits far below, its hazy golden lights staring up, seeming to watch them draw closer.

Remus shivers. “How do you stand going down there for shopping?”

“Well, we’re never there very long,” Huw says pointedly. Remus nods a bit sheepishly; food is always scarce here. “But don’t change the subject.”

“I didn’t.”

“It never made the news. Well. It did. They’re saying an earthquake destabilised the gas pipes under that bit of London. A bloody earthquake. Is that the best your people could come up with?”

“My people?”

“It wasn’t going to be the death eaters covering their work up, was it?”

Remus shrugs uncomfortably. “They’re probably under a lot of pressure right now,” he says.

"Pssh. Us, too."

"I'm aware." Remus elbows Huw in the ribs. "Maybe I'll come with you next time you go for a food run. Make it shorter again."

"Are you joking? You'd make it longer. End up chopping the guy on the till, 'cos he said something you didn't agree with about the bloody, the bloody, the state of the world."

"And you'd find it very entertaining."

"I find everything entertaining. Keeps me young."

"I think you'll be okay for now, you're younger than I am."

"Exactly," Huw grins. "I bet you'd be a-- a whippersnapper like me if you didn't worry so much."

"I don't worry that much."

"It's all you do."

"Well with the state of the world, can you blame me?"
Remus asks.

"Yep," Huw says. "You've not got the right to be scared, I'll tell you why. Wizard talents. Make yourself disappear. Change the way you look. Turn yourself into a gerbil or something."

Peter. His name rings like a toll inside Remus. He can only barely suppress the urge to rub his face.

"See, I would be achieving my wildest gerbil dreams right now," Remus says flatly, "but I've got the Trace on me."

"The Trace?"

“Tracks our magic. The death eaters would be onto me in a heartbeat if I tried to use it. Means they can find us, take us in.”

“That’s... authoratian. Author-- auth-- authoritarian.”

“Some people get out of it. You have to get on a registry.”

“Oh, and you’re too... toothy for that? Too furry? Too blasted nippy?”

“No. They didn’t like the choices I made for OWLs.”

Huw slaps his arm a bit too hard. “Knowing you, you took seventeen, like.”

“Nah,” Remus says. “I copied my friend Sirius’s choices. And of course it’s ‘cos I’m a werewolf.”

Huw goes quiet for a while. “Sirius Black? The outlaw kid?”

“Oh, don’t you start.”

“You shagged Sirius Black?”

“We didn’t shag,” Remus says, panicking. “We sat on the ledge outside our dorm room window and smoked pot together. I kissed him at night when the others were asleep. He would skip classes with me when my joints played up. We had a mutual unrequited crush on a friend who was on our house’s sports team and we used to bitch about how much of a shit he was until we were too tired and high to pretend we hated him.”

Huw blinks. “So you shagged him.”

“Shut it.” Remus pushes him.

“Isn’t he on the run? Most wanted, all that?”

“I mean, James is giving him a run for his money these days. Ever since the New War started anyway.” Remus clears his throat. “That’s the, uh, the sports player.”

“Christ alive. That’s hilarious,” Huw cackles. “You never told me you’ve got criminal friends! The two most wanted, too!”

“Technically I’m a criminal too,” Remus protests. “It’s not all them. I help.”

“What have you done, then?”

“I broke into the Ministry last year and put up graffiti.” He doesn’t mention that he had help.

“That’s pussy shit,” Huw dismisses. “What else?”

“I was there. At Little Hangleton.”

“Oh?”

“The place the Old War ended. I didn’t get to fight much. James, he cracked his whole chest open. Almost died, but I don’t think he noticed. I saw Voldemort with my own two eyes.”

“What did he look like?”

Remus thinks about the question. “One of those naked cats. No fur. The skinny ones with the grey skin. He was trying to kill my friends at the time, though, so my memory might be failing me.”

Huw claps him on the back. “I trust your assessment. Come on, it’s only a bit further.”

The chill gets thicker as they descend over the bridge that leads into town. Merthyr has become too big for its body since Remus knew it as a child, expanding out of itself. It feels overfilled and empty at the same time, alleyways bulging with dozens of hanging clotheslines, sheets blustering in the dull wind like ghosts.

"Post office is just up here," Huw mutters. He doesn't sound scared -- Remus doesn't know that he has the capacity to sound scared -- but he's no longer at-ease like he was. "Stay close to me."

Remus nods. "I've got a cloak of invisibility with me, if that's any help."

"As cool as that is, and you have to show me it later," Huw replies lowly, not looking at him, "I don't think it'll do much good." His amber eyes dart across the road, back and forth. Back and forth.

Remus can hear Sirius louder now. *No! Leave them out of this! They've got nothing to give you.*

"They won't swarm in if we're quick," Huw mutters. "They can smell lycanthropy, though. Kissed one of us last year."

"I'm sorry."

Huw shrugs. "It's fine." He breaks into a jog down the pavement, past a huddled homeless woman who he tosses a pound at and over a stray dog. "Come *on*, Lupin."

Remus jogs after him, glancing left and right. No cars on the road; there are no cars around here at all, nobody owns them. The dementors aren't close enough to see, not peering over the rooftops, not swirling above in a strange

black storm. But Sirius' voice grows louder and louder each minute.

Ahead, Huw trips over a drain and swears but doesn't stop. Remus speeds up to catch up to him, and they run together down the road. He feels like a kid again, a young boy running to school. Before Hogwarts and magic; before complication, before Sirius. Maybe that's what Remus should divide his life into. Before Sirius and after James.

"Come on." Huw snares his wrist and pulls Remus around the corner at the end of the street. Down the next road, the red of the post office stands out bloody through the smog and cold. "There."

"I can go the rest of the way."

"Let's stick together." Huw does not look both ways before pulling Remus across the street.

They hurry down the pavement there together, under abandoned scaffolding from a building project that hasn't been worked on in years, going rusty with age. Brown-copper down the sides like precious metals. None of those around here. Coal dust and Westminster's dirty money. The smell of bad magic from London; perhaps it travelled here with Remus and never left him.

Huw pulls him to a stop in front of the post office. "I'll wait out here."

"Come in with me?" Remus asks, feeling like a child.

"Nah." Huw shakes his head. "They're getting closer. I need to see if they start swarming. I'll come in if they do. Go!"

He shoves Remus. Remus staggers into the door and it gives way to him. The bell jingles and he finds himself in the golden-coloured warmth of the post office.

The lady behind the desk has a perm and a general air of discontentment to her, like she's had a very bad year. "Yes?" she asks impatiently.

"Uh." Remus crosses the empty room to her. "I've got a letter to send to Germany."

She stares. "I don't have time for jokes."

"My family's German," Remus bullshits on the fly. "It's for my cousin. Look." He rifles in his pocket and pulls out Lily's letter, her name on the front, the address dark and scratchy under it.

"German?" She narrows her eyes at him.

Shit. "Uh. We moved here before the war. Most of us. I'm not a nazi."

She nods slowly. "It'll be expensive."

"That's fine. I've got cash." Most of it stolen from other wolves in the warren. Remus doesn't have the heart to feel bad about it, though he might have once.

Cautiously, the lady takes the letter from him and rings him up. As Remus hands her the money, he glances over his shoulder anxiously. Huw is leaning up against the front window, arms crossed, the back of his jacket a great dark mass there. Faintly, Remus can hear him whistling.

"Thanks," he tells the lady, once she's handed him his change. "Miserable weather these days, isn't it?"

She blinks tiredly at him. "Always," she replies.

A bit spooked, Remus nods. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

Outside it's colder still. Sirius' voice swarms in, shouting. Incoherent with the sounds of fighting and burning, of that shack collapsing piece by slow piece.

Huw is shuddering, arms wrapped around himself. He turns glassy eyes on Remus. "We need to get out of here. You sent it?"

"Yeah." Remus takes his arm. "You're still here. I promise."

Huw nods tightly and shakes him off. "I know. Come on 'en." And he takes off running.

Remus sprints after him. They dart across the carriageway, ducking low even though it won't help. There are no muggles still outside. They seem to have figured out that it's not safe out.

They make it to the end of the street and take the turning back onto the main road, which sits wide, empty and grey before them, stretching out and out towards the hillside, looming high.

There is a dementor ten feet away.

Remus scrambles to a stop, frozen. He grabs at Huw's arms and Huw grabs at his. They both go dead still, frozen.

The dementor doesn't move towards them. It seems to watch them for a while, almost hovering there. The dark cloud of its tattered robes hangs around it, impervious to

the wind. It is the darkest thing in this whole town. *You're afraid, I know*, Riddle is hissing. *Did you expect anything else from me?* Sirius is replying.

It still does not move forwards. Remus almost wants to shout at it to kill him quickly, to get it over with.

"Shit," he whispers, mostly to himself. "Shit."

Huw's grip on his arm gets very tight. He inhales sharply. Whatever he's hearing, it's sending him somewhere else.

The dementor rises on the air then, as if picked up by the wind. Remus squeezes his eyes shut and then tells himself no. He's not going to die with his eyes closed. He's going to see his country one last time and know that he died there protecting it. That he died there, understood by it.

The dementor swarms backwards. Away from them. It sweeps its great cloak around, the white bones of its fingers sticking through the folds, and disappears over a nearby rooftop. Gone.

Sirius' screams dies down. James' voice, after the fight, saying, *I can't breathe. I can't breathe. I can't breathe*, fades. The world goes quiet and still.

"Bloody hell," Huw mutters at his side. He presses the side of his head against Remus' shoulder so hard it hurts. "It left?"

Remus laughs with the hysteria of a miracle. "We're not dead," he whispers.

Huw glances up at him, blinking hard. He's not crying but he looks like he got close to it for a moment there.

“Fuck,” he murmurs. And then his eyes go wide. “We need to get out of here.”

“Yeah,” Remus says, shaking himself. “More might be coming--”

“It’s not that,” Huw snaps. He grabs Remus’ arm and tugs him down a sidestreet, through a lashing of white bedsheets, hanging low from a line. He pulls and pulls him until they reach a grey wheelie bin, stuffed overfull with stinking rubbish bags.

“What is it?” Remus asks, looking around frantically. He half expects a dementor to lunge from the blustering clothes.

Huw pushes him down by the shoulders behind the bin, then squeezes in beside Remus very tightly. He puts a finger to his lips.

“I think I know where it went,” he murmurs against the brown pads of his fingers. “You’re wanted, aren’t you?”

“Yeah,” Remus breathes. “Why--”

There is a sharp crack out on the main road. It rings and echoes, the faint sound of it reverberating out through the valley. The last time Remus heard the snap of apparition it was five months ago. It didn’t end well.

Huw goes very still beside him. Remus holds his breath.

“You’re sure it said here?” a male voice calls out, distant and getting closer.

“It pointed to this shithole on the map.” A sniff. “Don’t know why anyone would hide here. Jesus, it fucking smells.”

“Muggles live in filth. What else is new?” The first man pauses. Then he raises his voice. “If you apparate away, we’ll find you quicker. Best come out with your hands up, or we’ll find you ourselves, whoever you are.”

“Did the dementor say?”

“It’s a fucking dementor, it can’t speak. ‘Course it didn’t.”

“Well sorry for asking. Just thought I’d check.” A hesitation. Footsteps up and down the road -- they must be looking around. He’s closer to the alleyway when he says, “What if it’s Black?”

“Or Potter,” the other responds, sounding hungry. “The Dark Lord’s been frantic. No idea why. Kids, both of them, and blood traitors at that.”

“They must be valuable to him somehow. Best not to question him.”

“Of course! I would never.”

Footsteps stutter closer towards the alleyway again. Beside Remus, Huw reaches out to hold onto his fingers, gripping them so tightly that it hurts. Remus is sure they’ll break, but they don’t, not quite. They only creak, and even that sound feels too loud in the consuming silence that has fallen.

“Been to London yet?” one of them asks conversationally.

The other grunts. “Nah. Still building there, aren’t they?”

“Yeah. A new Diagon Alley. Less blood treachery out in the streets this time. I spoke to old Borgin the other day. He’s thrilled. Got a benefactor in old Mistress Black.”

“Which one?”

“The bloody crazy one.”

“That’s all of them.”

A short laugh. “Old woman. Off her fucking rocker now, apparently. Black’s mother.”

“Ah. Well, no wonder.”

“Aye.”

Their voices have drifted just a bit from the mouth of the alleyway. Huw leans over to whisper in Remus’ ear, mouth pressed against it, “Breathe. Remus, breathe.”

Remus tugs in a huge breath. He hadn’t realised he was holding it that long. The world seems to regain its colour around him; he feels his heart slow as if possessed.

“Fuck,” he whispers.

“They’re talking about your Black?” Huw murmurs.

Remus nods. “My Black,” he whispers.

“If they were around here, they’re gone now,” one of the voices calls, further away. “It’s bloody freezing. We should go.”

The other death eater clears his throat. “Let me try something. Where’s my ruddy wand--”

Remus almost laughs. They didn’t even take their wands out. Perhaps it’ll be overconfidence that kills blood supremacy.

The death eater clears his throat. "Homenum revelio!"

The air seems to freeze. Remus squeezes his eyes shut and holds Huw's hand and thinks that this is it. This is where he dies. Some dingy horrible alleyway in his home country, swarmed by the bad smell, almost choking in it. A muggle hand clutched in his own. James and Sirius probably won't even know what happened.

Huw seems to have other ideas. He rockets to his feet, pulling Remus with him. He tugs him and begins to run, takes three paces--

"Nothing," the death eater sighs out on the street. "Except the muggles in the houses."

Huw freezes mid-step. He turns to look over his shoulder at Remus. Remus stares back, wide-eyed.

"Should've told the dementors to kiss them first," the second death eater replies. "Come on."

There are two cracks. Just like that, they're alone again.

"Oh fuck," Huw says.

It clicks in Remus' mind. "We're not human," he says. "That's what it was. The spell reveals human presences."

Huw lets go of his hand to sweep his hair out of his face. His eyes are wild with the chase, revved up with nowhere to go.

"Fuck," he whispers to himself. "We made it."

A lucky miss. So close that it should have killed them; by all rights they should be dead. They are living on stolen time.

But Remus nods.

“Yeah,” he says. “Come on. Let’s keep moving.”

Huw nods. “Thanks,” he says stiffly.

“No problem.”

“You speak too English-like.”

“I’ll try to fix it,” Remus promises. Perhaps a lie. He doesn’t know.

Chapter End Notes

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ROSTOCK

Chapter Notes

big ouchie here lads!

usual tws: violence blood injury mentow illness etc .

enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

My Dearest Remus,

That darkness does the face of Earth entomb, when living light should kiss it? And by that I do mean, of course, that I hope you're not making a habit of that pessimism, you'll get wrinkles, and even though you're very handsome I don't know that it'll stand the test of time. I've been reading 'Macbeth' in my spare time between shifts, because someone left a copy of the English version in a tear in my mattress. Dog-eared and notated. It probably meant a lot to someone. When I asked, they said the person who slept on it before is dead. Who's pessimistic now?

Your letter(s) were concerningly short for your standards. Should I be worried? Don't answer that; blink twice. Misspell three words in your next letter, then I'll know for sure. Maybe the wolves are reading the letters you send, or James, if you're sending them through him. Have you really not been writing to him? I would tell you off, but I've been doing the same. I'm not quite sure why. I keep trying to come up with excuses for it in my head and you know what I think it is? I think it's shame. I think it's not just shame either; it's the fact that if I started writing to him I don't

think I'd stop. But I suppose you know all about that sort of obsessiveness.

So yeah, I'm doing okay. It's lonely but I've got enough friends that I usually don't feel it. I think of you all the time, you and him. And no, I have not run into Black on a trip to Netto Marken-Discount. Yes, that's the real name of a shop near me. A chain, no less! Preposterous. And I thought we Brits were bad at naming things. (Apologies for referring to you as a Brit -- a mortal insult, I'm sure.)

I spend most of the time sitting with the kids and keeping them entertained, or patrolling the perimeter. A few times, they've let me go out gathering with some of the older Keepers, to West Germany where we harvest shrivelfig and alihotsy by nightfall. But most of the time they keep me here. It makes me antsy. I miss the insecurity of London, the risk. God I sound like James. Blinking twice.

Suppose I won't have to miss it much longer, though! By the time I send this, we will have already seen each other again. And god knows there'll be some risk involved there. This is a crazy idea. I assume you know that. I assume if you were here right now you would say to me 'Lily, since when has that stopped us?' Or you would say 'I'm distracted by how sad I am about my love life'.

Sorry. I shouldn't tease you. I miss him too, if it means anything to you to hear that. I miss him like I've never missed anything, even more than I miss you. It's crazy what a year can do. If you'd told me in second year that one day I would lie down at night and dream of seeing his stupid smile again, I would've hexed you out of the room.

I'm getting rambly. I'm sorry for that. I'll see you soon, okay? I am saying that mostly to myself.

When shall we three meet again? In thunder, lightning, or in rain? (Or will it be on the Hogwarts Train?)

- Yours (affectionately), Lily.

"Can you take my patrol shift for me tonight?"

"Jesus Christ," Lily says, looking up from her bed, on which is spread exactly three knives, a pair of brass knuckles, a spare bra, a lighter, five potions flasks (two dittany, two explosive drafts, one grafting fluid), six clip-on razor heads, and a bottle of painkillers. "Tonight? I'm leaving tomorrow."

Clara makes a face. "Mattes and I are going out tonight," she says. "I told you about it, you remember, no? He's taking me into town. We are going to people-watch the muggles and kiss behind the film theatre."

"It's a movie theatre," Lily corrects. "And can't you save it for another night? Not that I don't appreciate being privy to your conquests. I wish you all the best in them, truly. I just have to be out of Rostock by dawn."

Clara pads across to her. There are five beds in here but they're the only ones in the room right now. There is rarely time to lie around in Rostock.

"Please?" she whines. "You know how unlucky I can be with boys. I was considering amortentia."

"Ha."

"You would have helped me brew it!"

"If we weren't so short on ingredients that David has had to scrape old thrown-out flasks clean to get to the shit stuck to the bottom, yeah."

"They made him do that?"

"He volunteered," Lily sighs, like it's quite tragic. "Wanted to help with the war effort."

"Bless his little heart." Clara sighs heavily, flopping on her back onto Lily's bed and almost hitting the back of her head on the bottle of pills.

Lily sighs and shuffles everything into her backpack. She zips it up and flops down onto her back beside Clara. They both lie there staring at the ceiling for a while.

"You sent a letter the other day," Clara says. "Family?"

"A friend. He's in Wales."

"You have friends?"

"I'm eminently likeable. And you know that, otherwise you wouldn't be asking me for favours. My temperament necessitates their completion."

"Shut up," Clara groans. She rolls her head around to look at Lily, grinning in the side of her mouth. "Oh, *Lily*. The flower of my heart. My bosom friend. You help me so much. If it were not for you I would have tossed myself into the ocean by now. Your heart, it is larger than the submarine they have off the coast. Laboe."

"I'm the single thread keeping you on the mortal coil," Lily agrees. "Which is why you're palming me your wages for this week."

Clara smacks her on the arm. "I was going to get him flowers!"

"No you weren't!"

"Well I was thinking about it!" she defends. "You can be so judgemental sometimes."

Lily cracks up laughing. "Forgive me for thinking that if anyone deserves your attention, it isn't a boy."

"Mattes isn't just a boy." Clara sighs wistfully. "He's a man."

"He's five foot four. I could step on him if I wanted to."

"But you're valiantly protecting my future romantic prospects."

"Grudgingly," Lily sighs. "I'll take your bloody shift. Go on."

Clara rolls over and kisses her on the cheek. She slides off the bed. "You are a lifesaver!"

"Half your wages! A third!"

She tosses Lily a Mark, which Lily catches out of the air. "Don't spend it all in one place!"

Lily watches her leave with a heavy sigh. A crack in the ceiling rains a bit of dust; the kids must be running around upstairs. She watches it intently, scared for a moment that the ceiling will fall in and they'll have to deal with all of that paperwork. Then, she stands up off the bed and brushes a hand over her short hair.

A shift for tonight it is.

Rostock is a colourful town. Perhaps too colourful for the current state of Germany, but nobody's complaining. It's got these bricky, heavy townhouses all through the centre, in wide rows, all different colours. They all go pointed towards the top, flat-faced and pastel, with white gilded windows, their bodies painted red, pink, yellow, green. The town must look from a distance, Lily thinks, like a mismatched box of wrapped chocolates. A whole tin of Roses, and it smells as sweet as that too, bakers on every corner spinning soft-peaked sugar into gold dust, serving it for more than most people here get in their monthly paycheck.

Lily grew up in the midlands, in a stretch of town that never recovered from the war, Hangletonish and carrying ghosts on its shoulders. And thus she has known poverty like an old friend. Returning to it here has made her nostalgic in a way she has never been before, not in her memory, which is rather nice.

Now she is at work, and feels much like one of the old soldiers from her hometown, hollow-eyed and curling gnarled grey fingers behind the heavy brown lapels of their Service Club jackets. She imagines she has the presence they did, of something that would not attack you but could if it wanted to. A coiled spring orange-rusted shut. She doesn't remember their faces. Most of them are dead now. Petunia used to say they gave her the creeps, intimidated her like nothing else, but that was when they were too young to understand the world yet, and before Lily did that instead.

Tonight it's quiet out there; over the red rooftops of the town, out towards the ocean, which glimmers in a great dark mass. Beyond it, too far to see, is more Europe. Sweden or something; Lily doesn't know. West lies the coast

of Newhaven, burning like some strange torch. Hundreds of miles away, but she still imagines she can see it.

“You heard about that?” someone asked her a few days ago, when Lily mentioned it at the breakfast table. “British, aren’t you? Do you know anything about it?”

“No,” Lily told them. “The Order won’t fix it.”

“Won’t they?”

“If you were a death eater unafraid of getting muggles killed,” Lily asked rhetorically, “would you put out the deadly fire burning miles up your countryside, or would you sit and wait for the Order to do it first so you could snap them up as they worked?”

“Suppose you’re right about that.” And they looked away and started up their old conversation with someone else.

Feels like the whole world is burning these days; fiendfyre in Newhaven, arson down the south coast of uncouth Europe, great pillars of flame spotted miles away as Pureblood homes caught alight. Another the other day, close to the south coast of Germany. Too close for comfort, someone said as Lily sat with the kids the other night, and she disagrees. She is already a wildfire; she is already burning. She would welcome more flame to eat.

Lily patrols the far edge of the sanctuary for an hour or two without pausing. She paces until she’s sure her legs have numbed with it, moving entirely on autopilot. Through the fence and down the hill, the city lies far away enough that muggle children don’t stumble on them and GDR soldiers haven’t discovered them yet. Its lights cast an odd glow across the chiseled underside of the clouds, hovering low and still, unmoving. There are gunshots from far below

most nights. She has never asked what they're from; she can guess. The shadow of the Iron Curtain is too far from here to see, but she knows better than anybody that you don't have to see something to know it's there.

Remus is being predictably pathetic lately, she thinks, on the topic of things you cannot see that have outlived themselves, a sort of necromancy. Her gut aches with sympathy for his plight as much as it shrivels with hate for it. He can be unimaginably forgiving sometimes; you could punch him in the face and he wouldn't ask why you'd done it. It's a fatal flaw, and perhaps something foreign put it into him, family or inheritance, country or love, or James. It's going to get him killed one of these days and he probably won't even care. There's not much he cares about, least of all himself. That's something she learned about him in London.

"You're leaving tonight aren't you?" asks Mattias from behind her.

Lily heard him coming but pretends to jump anyway. "Matt? You scared me."

He grins toothily at her. Twelve the other day, but he still looks too young for it, in the way that lots of tween boys do. "I'm sneaky."

"You'd make a good spy," Lily confirms, and scrunches up the hair on top of his head in her hand.

"You're leaving, though. I was right."

"How did you know?"

"I gave Thom a Turkish Delight. He told me."

“And how did he know?”

“Overheard it.”

Lily tuts. “Little businessman, he is. A veritable capitalist.”

“Ver-it-table. Cap-it-tist.”

“Cap-it-al-ist.”

“What does it mean?”

“Unfriendly,” Lily replies. She puts an arm around him.
“You’ll be alright without me.”

“It won’t be the same,” Mattias sighs. “The other Hogwarts kids don’t like me. They say I’m a baby.”

“What makes them think that?”

“Another day and I would’ve been in the year below,” he sighs. “At my primary school they made fun of me for it too.”

“Well,” Lily says, “I think they’re jealous of your youthful good-looks. Means you’re far more spry than they are. They’ll all be in zimmer frames and dentures by the time the war is over, and you’ll be—”

“Out here fighting with you?”

“Maybe,” Lily says, wincing. “Maybe. But we’ll have to get you good at potionsmaking before that. Okay?”

Mattias nods eagerly. “Did you learn to do that at Hogwarts?”

“Of course. I learned everything at Hogwarts.”

He blinks starry eyes at her. "Do you think I'll ever be able to go?"

"Maybe," Lily admits. She thinks fast, trying not to say the wrong thing. "If you do, you have to be a Gryffindor for me, okay? You brave boy."

He beams. "My mum would be proud if I was in the smart house, though. She always said I'm very smart."

"Gryffindors can be smart."

"Yeah, but you're not," he jabs.

Lily fakes outrage. "You little twat."

He laughs at that, and then the smile slides off his face. It always does that. He's never properly happy, not in any way that lasts. Not since Macmillan and the Friends dragged him off the train and out of the jaws of death this time last year.

"You're going to go get more kids like us aren't you?" he asks. "Not-magic kids."

Lily kneels down to look him right in the eye. "You are magic," she murmurs. "Very magic."

"You know. Kids with normal parents."

She laughs faintly and brushes a bit of hair behind his ear. "Yes," she says. "I am."

"Will you get hurt?"

"Maybe," Lily admits. "But I'm very smart. I think I'll be alright. Worry about yourself, okay?"

"Make sure you come back?"

“Always,” she promises. “Come on. You should get to bed. How did you get out this late?”

“I climbed out of the window,” Mattias says, yawning.

Lily stands up straight. “Go on. Tell whoever’s on duty outside the doors that I sent you. They’ll let you off.”

Mattias nods. “G’night. I’ll see you...”

“Soon,” Lily promises. She holds her hand out and he shakes it hard, up and down, before turning around and walking back towards the sanctuary, looming like a large shadow through the trees. It’s a heavy brick building with a mossy roof, fifteen windows wide, a few storeys tall, with narrow, dark windows set into the slanted attic that stare at you like black eyes through the treetops. It used to be a hospital during the war. Now it’s abandoned, or so the muggles think.

She sighs and rubs her face. It feels like all she does lately is promise people that she won’t die. It gets exhausting; the more you say something, the more you question yourself about whether it’s really true. It haunts you. She hears her own voice in nightmares sometimes, promising James not to go to Germany and never come back.

And speaking of haunting things, lying things: there is a scream in the darkness.

Remus would have frozen, and James would have panicked; Lily hurls herself tight against the fence, hooking fingers through it. The cold hard mesh of it presses into her stomach. She stares into the night, famished, frozen and waiting.

Silence still. Then, another scream. “HELP!”

Lily glances over her shoulder. Already, dark figures are swarming through the open front doors of the sanctuary, back through the trees. Their shadows stretch far across the ground, dark strips. It'll take them too long to get here. Whoever it is, it might be dead by then.

"Fuck it," Lily murmurs to herself.

She claws her fingers through the diamond-shaped gaps in the fence and heaves her legs up in front of her, up against the fence. The wire rattles and clangs. She reaches one hand out higher and pulls her legs up further, fingers burning with it, the bones clicking click-click-click-click like doors groaning. The fence creaks and leans and she presses her weight to it, the iron cold against her cheek, before raising the other hand and hooking it over the top.

Straining and gasping, Lily heaves herself over. The top digs into her stomach in a sharp line of pain; she grunts and drops down to the ground on the other side, crouching low and listening.

Quiet. Then, through the trees, down the hill, a primal sort of shout, like something ripped from an animal.

Lily does not think, she does not look back, she hurtles like a wild thing into the underbrush. Her feet scuff over the dry leafy pit of an old ditch and she skids down it, throwing mud and dust out in front of her, then leaps clean over a fallen tree with arms pinwheeling and down, down, down the slope, grabbing a pine tree with both hands as she runs to kick off it, flying down through the darkness at a dizzying slope. Birds rise screeching from the trees around her; she feels like a monster, like a natural disaster.

Crunch. Lily twists her ankle and buckles, but not a moment later she finds her feet again, knees scuffing off-angled

through the dirt. She does not stop moving. She runs and then falls again, smack smack down onto her knees and elbows.

Another cry in the woods somewhere, closer now, closer.

“Where are you?!” Lily raises her voice to shout.

“HERE!” comes the response, north. Down further, down, down. “PLEASE!”

She drags herself to her feet. The great maw of the forest looms dark below her, moonlight too dim to cast much of undergrowth into itself. She draws a deep breath and then another, and then jumps one foot after the other over a boulder — perhaps some old piece of rubble from the war — and skids on her heels down the slope, weight placed heavy against her knee joints, holding down the backs of them. Cold air screams across her face. Above, there is faint shouting, too far away to hear.

“HELP!”

Lily raises her arms to grab a branch overhead and uses it to swing clear over a heavy patch of nettles. She rises like smoke over the great gnarled mass of an old torn-up root system, buh-bam, one foot on it and a great leap from it, sending it rolling down the hill. She skids left, around two twisted-together trees, and towards a clearing, sitting pale and dusty in the faint light.

Then, she trips over the body.

Lily slams to a stop on her knees, panting. She peers back through the darkness at it, squinting.

Dark eyes meet hers there, sitting in the thick void. It's too dim to see who or what it is.

"Friend?" Lily asks cautiously. "Of the sanctuary."

"I'm dying," the stranger groans in reply. A woman, older. Strange accent. Something European. "Help me."

"We've got children in there."

"I would not have come if I wasn't a friend."

"You would be surprised," Lily mutters, and fumbles through the darkness until she has her hands on the stranger, on warm, heaving flesh, hot through clothing. She leaves them there, unmoving. She is holding death in her fingers. "Where?"

"I don't know what he cursed me with. My shoulder."

"Who was it?"

A faint groan. "I didn't know where else to do that he would not find me. Rumour has it he doesn't know this place."

Lily stills. She stares and stares until her eyes burn. "Who was it?" she asks again.

The stranger's hand clasps around her wrist. "Help me."

Lily grabs the hand and feels her way down it, fingers skittering a trail across the rough skin, mapping heavy wrinkles. She grabs the shoulder, digs a thumb into the hot bloody wound. "You won't bleed out."

"You would be surprised," the stranger replies, and groans with pain. "Oh, you psychopath."

Lily takes a deep breath. She presses her thumb in deeper. "And you promise me you'll tell me? Even... even if you don't tell them?"

It feels duplicitous. It feels hungry. The stranger's shallow breathing stutters and she laughs, choking. A dead sort of sound.

"Do you want to die? Promise me."

"I promise," she replies, chortling.

"Fine." Lily clears her throat and screams, up towards the sanctuary, against her better judgement, "HELP US! WE'RE HERE!"

My Dearest Clara,

I hope the date went well! Kissing behind the film theater et cetera et cetera et cetera. I'm sure you've already heard, but in the night (while on YOUR shift, thanks for that), I found a woman in the woods. Injured. Almost dead.

She's unconscious in the infirmary. I still have to get back to Britain by dawn, so I'm calling a favour with you, a real one. Keep an eye on her for me, okay? Make sure she's comfortable. I'll be back as soon as I can.

- Yours (tiredly), Lily

PS: here's your Mark back. A downpayment.

"You're late," Moody says the second she lands.

"It was your portkey, not mine," Lily replies, finding her feet. "Where am I?"

Moody looks up at her, scowling heavily. He's sitting on a low stool backed into the corner of the large warehouse Lily is standing in. The ground is coated with heavy black stones like lumps of coal and the ceiling is half translucent, light shining between gaps in the corrugated iron, making the whole place feel hazy and strange. The walls are made of stone brick and look very sturdy. It's freezing.

"Ten miles out of Bridgnorth," Moody says sharply. "You're the first to arrive."

"Late as it gets then," Lily replies. She wanders in a long circle through the warehouse, peering at the walls. When she reaches the door, the smell of summer greenery hits her. A bit rotten, overgrown. Pulpy with heat. Heavy, unkempt foliage lines the outside of the train tracks, which stretch south to north, still and unmoving. The metal catches the sun in bright yellow lines. Clouds obscure most of the sky, head-achingly bright white.

"We're boarding from here?" she asks.

Moody looks up at her. He's got his teeth snagged into the skin of his upper lip. It gives him a sharkish sort of appearance.

"Yes," he says after a moment. "And getting off at a stop exactly ten minutes down the line. No emergency porkeys."

"Ten minutes isn't long enough."

"It's the only option we've got," Moody snaps. "You can go back to Rostock if you want, girl."

Lily glances at the floor, face heating a bit with embarrassment. She looks away and says nothing else. It's horribly awkward. Moody is one of those people she hopes she'll never have to see again after the war ends. He's got this horrible, oppressive energy to him. Like he'd bite your head off if he was hungry enough, chew right through your skull, 'til there was nothing left there.

She casts a glance at him. He's already looking back at his notes, a map spread out on his lap in front of him, a sneakoscope spinning on his knee.

"Aren't you going to ask a security question?" she asks.

He looks up at her and laughs a bit nastily. "No hair to steal for polyjuice. I can ask if you want, though."

"Go ahead."

"Your sister's name?"

"Petunia." Lily squints at him. "How would you know that?"

"I wouldn't," Moody replies darkly. "Be careful which questions you answer. Constant vigilance!"

"Ha," Lily murmurs. "That was good." And she steps out of the warehouse doors towards the track.

It is very silent, but for the very faint roar of a distant motorway, far away from here, probably close to Bridgnorth. There are no people around, not that she can see, and her eyesight is very good. Lily grapples a hand around a tree and uses it to pull herself up onto the tracks, standing on the metal ridge along the side. It's very still beneath her.

A bird chirps above. Lily looks up at it; a wren. She pulls her knife out of her pocket and gestures threateningly with it, in case it's an animagus. The bird chirps again and flutters off into the white sky.

"You're getting too paranoid," she tells herself, not believing it. With a heavy breath, she sits down on the tracks, then lies back, legs folded over one side, head rested against the metal on the other.

No vibration. Lily presses her ear to the ridge and listens. Very, very faintly, she can hear the metal grind with tension. But it's far away. They've got time. Not enough of it, and certainly not enough to spare, but enough that for now, she can breathe in that British smell and remember that she is alive.

There's a pop inside the warehouse. The air seems to go stiff with it for a moment.

"Alright, Moody?" a voice asks, sounding tired.

Lily sits bolt upright and listens, hands curling into the tracks.

"You're late," Moody repeats. She's getting the impression that he says that to most people when they see him. Perhaps just to put them on-edge.

"Oh, shut it," Dorcas replies.

"You haven't even told us why we're here."

And it's James' voice. James' stupid grumbling voice.

Lily is ashamed to admit it but she almost cries. Not twelve hours ago, she held a life in her hands and was sure she

could have killed if she wanted to, was sure she could have commanded death like a hawk-heeler tames its beast. Now she thinks she would like to find a rug to roll herself up in.

“McGonagall was supposed to inform you,” Moody snaps.

“Yeah, well, she’s been busy.”

“Apologies for the inconvenience then, Potter.” A creak from the stool. “The last thing I said to you, Meadowes?”

“You told me there were five dead,” Dorcas replies. “And more if I didn’t hurry.”

“And you, Potter?”

“Uh,” James says. “Last week, passing through. You told me I should shower more.”

“Aye. And I stand by it.”

Dorcas clears her throat. “Are we the only ones here?”

“Your little friend’s already gone to scope out the area.”

“Friend?” James asks, sounding far too hopeful. There’s the sound of his footsteps approaching.

Lily stands up and brushes herself off, turning around to face the warehouse. James comes into view in the doorway; he’s got a dark bruise on his left cheek. Light refracts through a hairline crack in his glasses, casting a pale streak across the wrinkles of his crow’s feet. His hair is still short, but not as short as hers. He looks like hammered shit.

He stares up at her. “Oh,” he says. “It’s you.”

“Glad to see you too,” Lily sighs. She slides down the slope from the tracks to the warehouse entrance and opens her arms. “Come here.”

James seems not to want a hug — or perhaps not to want to want one — but he makes a miserable, inevitable sort of sound and shuffles in for a hug anyway. “You didn’t write,” he says into her shoulder.

Lily breathes in the smell of his hair, the smell of nature around them. She closes her eyes and imagines she might stay there for a while. “I didn’t think it would help.”

“Remus didn’t write either.”

“I know. He told me.”

James stiffens. He seems to want to pull away but Lily doesn’t let him.

“I hate you both,” he says, and seems to mean it.

Lily pats the back of his head with a half-cupped palm. She could hold the moon in her hands if she wasn’t so busy holding him. “I missed you,” she murmurs in his ear, and means it.

“Is Remus coming?”

“Yeah.”

James does pull away then. “They didn’t tell us,” he says again. “About this.”

“They didn’t tell us either, not in words. Not ’til a week ago, when the portkeys arrived,” Lily replies. “But Remus and I

figured it was coming. The Friends aren't around to do it anymore. We figured we'd inherit the responsibility."

"Gambit's still alive," James replies. "And in fighting shape."

"Jeremiah's not," Dorcas puts in, stepping into the light. She leans against the doorway. "Lily."

"Dorcas," Lily says. She steps around James to hug her. Dorcas does not hug her back, but Lily gets the impression that she would if she could.

All too soon, they separate. Dorcas nods to her. The scar on her lip flexes as she smiles. "You look well."

"I've been surviving," Lily says. She glances down at her hands. There's still blood under her fingernails from the night. She shoves them in her pockets. "How have you two been, since...?"

Evidently it was the wrong thing to bring up. James seems to shutter into himself, looking away. His shoulders curl. He looks like he'd like very much to disappear.

Dorcas looks right into Lily's eyes and says, "Fine."

"I see," Lily replies hesitantly. "Are you sure you don't want a hug?"

Dorcas shakes her hands out, like there's taut muscles in them. "I'm alright," she promises. "Thank you, though. What's it like in Rostock?"

"Hectic. We harbour more refugees every day."

"It's good work you're doing."

“We’ll end up full soon,” Lily replies. “We’ve got warders coming soon to expand the inside. And avoiding GDR officials is hard enough as it is.”

“Be careful of warders,” James puts in. “The Order got scammed when they tried to expand.”

“Guess it’s pretty crowded in HQ then?” Lily asks.

“We sleep in a storage cupboard, practically,” Dorcas says, with so-be-it mundanity. “You’re not missing much.”

“I didn’t think I was,” Lily assures, and then realises that that probably sounds a bit mean. She reaches out to loop an arm through James’. “Do you know who else is coming?”

“No,” Dorcas sighs. “Caradoc shoved a portkey into our hands and then we were here.”

“The Order’s just as organised as ever, then?”

James squeezes her arm tight to his side. “Most of the Order are dealing with... with the fire in Newhaven, actually.” He coughs. “I don’t think there’ll be many of us.”

“Ah.” Lily stares from him to Dorcas. “What’s up with that whole... thing?”

“Someone started a fiendfyre in Newhaven,” Dorcas sighs. “It’s eaten up half of the East Sussex countryside now. The muggles have managed to keep it from chewing up any towns, but they can’t get rid of it.”

“And the death eaters are letting it burn!” James blurts, face very dark. “We can’t even go help, they’ll pick us off like... like...”

“Fish in a barrel?” Dorcas offers.

“Sitting ducks?” Lily recommends.

“Flies,” James finishes.

“So we’re mixing metaphors,” Lily sighs.

“I don’t know what that means. Listen.” He makes a sound of frustration. “Can we not talk about Newhaven? It’s... stressful.”

Dorcas laughs very quietly.

Lily shakes her head. “Everything’s stressful right now,” she sighs. “Not in the least including the state of you. Have you washed your face since I left Britain? Once?”

James has the good grace to look bashful, rubbing the back of his hand over his pimply cheek. “It’s been a shit few weeks,” he sighs. “Forgive me for not having that sort of thing sorted out.”

Inside the warehouse, there’s a faint pop. James goes perfectly still.

“Alright Moody?” Remus’ voice asks.

James lurches out of the doorway and behind the outer wall, out of sight. He stares at Lily with big eyes. Lily stares right back, unsure of what to say.

“The last thing I said to you?” Moody asks, rather more gruffly than he asked James and Dorcas.

Remus clears his throat. “Little Hangleton, wasn’t it? You told me to get out of everyone’s way. And I did.”

Moody huffs. "You look terrible. If you fuck this up, you know you're cut off."

"I'm mostly cut off anyway," Remus sighs. "There's nothing out there."

Moody says nothing to that.

Lily decides she should be the brave one. She lets go of James and peers around the doorway. "Remus?"

Remus looks up at her from the middle of the warehouse. His amber eyes look a bit wild and his hair has grown out and gone all floppy in the front, falling into his face. He's lost weight and looks very tired, holding himself like he's got a lot of aches. He's in a big dark canvas jacket, with his hands tucked into the pockets, and it makes him look small and unsure.

He cracks a smile. "Hey, Lils."

Lily runs over, though she hugs him slow and gentle, winding her arms through his, gripping the back of the coat. Remus keeps his hands in his pockets for a moment before sighing and pulling one out to pat her on the back, rubbing a light circle there.

"I'm glad you're alive," he says in her ear.

Lily nods against his shoulder. "You too." She clears her throat and whispers, "He's here."

Remus goes still for a moment. "Outside?" he murmurs.

"Waiting for you."

"Ah. Well, if you'll excuse me, I need to go off myself."

Lily laughs faintly, not much heart in it. "He's not angry. Just sad."

"That's worse. You know that's worse."

She pulls away and tilts her head towards the door. "You can't run from it."

"I'm good at running," Remus warns.

That makes Lily quite sad. "Go," she murmurs.

Remus nods. He wanders out into the sunlight and Lily follows him.

James stares at the ground, appearing not to want to look at Remus. They stand like that for a while, the two of them, neither speaking.

"This isn't..." Remus starts. "I'm not..."

"Don't," James says faintly.

Remus takes a step forwards but Dorcas gets in the way, standing in front of James.

"Back off," she snaps. "He doesn't want to talk."

"It's okay," James sighs. He runs a hand over his mouth and looks up at Remus then. They make eye contact. The rest of the world seems to go away as they scan each other's faces.

"James," Remus starts.

James raises a hand. "I'm not angry," he says.

"Yes you are," Remus replies.

"I am," James admits. "It's been a crap few months. Mary died."

"I heard." Remus chews his lip and blinks furiously. He looks very young at that moment.

"How's Wales?"

"It's shit." Remus smiles a wobbly smile. "I've been alright."

"No close calls?"

"None. I've been fine."

James nods. He moves past Dorcas to give Remus a very quick, very stiff hug, before letting go and stepping behind her again, wrapping his arms around himself tightly.

"This is shit," he mutters. "When are we moving?"

Remus looks like his whole world has just come crashing down. Lily would like to go to him, but she thinks it would upset James even more.

Dorcas taps her foot on the ground, standing firm between James and Remus. "It won't be long now. Is it just us?"

"It was just four last year," Lily puts in. "Is it enough?"

Moody clunks towards them, over the black stones. His wooden leg crunches the gravel into the cold earth. "We're supposed to have five," he snaps.

"Mary died," James says dully.

Moody squints at him. "I see. Four it'll be."

“How fitting,” Lily mutters.

Moody hands out small, dark pouches. “Peruvian darkness powder,” he says. “It won’t be a stealth mission. Get in, section off the kids you need. Use force if you have to. Don’t be afraid to make a scene, you’re all wanted anyway, especially you, Potter. Get out, jump from the train roof onto the rooftop of our next warehouse along. Don’t miss it.”

“Jump?!” James says, alarmed.

All he gets for his trouble is a very sharp look. “You’re all armed?”

Remus pulls out the revolver, charmed full of bullets. It looks foreign in his large hands. James whips a baseball bat off his back and holds it tight. Lily pulls out a knife. Dorcas flexes her fingers out in front of her and says, “I’ll be fine.”

“Suit yourself,” Moody says. “Weapons away. For now.”

They all put their assets away. Moody gestures for them all to hold out their hands and slaps a sticky, bright yellow goop onto each of their palms.

“Ew,” Dorcas mutters.

“What is this?” Remus asks.

“It’s Erkling blood,” Lily puts in, before Moody can answer. “It’s an, uh, adhesive.” She glances up at him. “To help us get onto the top of the train.”

Moody nods his head at her once. “It won’t stay on for long. You’ll have to be quick.”

“We can do quick,” James says, without his familiar ease. He looks very grim. “We’ll get as many off as we can.”

Dorcas speaks up from beside him. “You’re sure they won’t be expecting us?”

“They’ll be expecting you,” Moody says grimly. “But they won’t have good security. Most of his folks are too busy to stop you from picking off a few firsties.”

“Busy doing what?” Remus asks.

Lily clears her dry throat. “In Europe,” she says. “They’re expanding. They’ve started in France already, and they’re going to hit Germany in the next few months, we think. It’s been peaceful so far, but it won’t be for long.”

“Is that what the arson attacks have been about?” James asks.

“Arson attacks?” Dorcas inhales.

James turns to her, nodding. “Overheard McGonagall talking about it. Someone’s been running around burning down Pureblood estates in Europe--”

Moody claps his hands with a crack so loud they all jump. “Focus.”

James grimaces, straightening his glasses with the inside of his wrist to avoid touching his face with the sticky yellow slime. “Sorry.”

“The train passes through in...” Moody glances at his pocket watch. “Five minutes. The back carriage has no windows. You’ll be climbing onto that one. Stay low until it passes through. They’ll be watching.” He looks between

them all, scanning them, eyes so wide they look wild. “Ten minutes. Understood?”

“Yes, sir,” they all mumble.

Moody nods. Then, he turns and treks back into the warehouse. There is silence, and then the faint popping sound of a portkey activating.

“Oh shit,” Dorcas murmurs. “We’re... alone.”

Silence hovers between them all, a great wall.

“Last chance to back out,” Lily jokes without mirth. “Come on.”

They all shuffle up to the foliage near the tracks, goopy hands held out in front of them like an odd ritual. James shuffles furthest from Remus, who sits on Lily’s side, who sits next to Dorcas. The girls squished into the middle, the boys on the outside. They duck their heads under the heavy greenery so as not to be seen. They press too close together, all of them, and Lily can smell London and Rostock and Merthyr and the midlands all at the same time; they are one human culture clash, they are a testament to abandonment.

Faintly, with a low whining, the tracks begin to vibrate against the ground.

“Not long now,” Lily murmurs, mostly to fill the quiet. She nudges her shoulder against Remus. “You’re really going to use that gun?”

“Not if I can help it,” Remus replies. Then, a bit lamely, “It’s loud. Kids don’t like loud noises.”

“So that’ll help us coralle them,” Lily contends, then winces. “Not... not in a scary way.”

Dorcas laughs wryly. “You think we can fight in a war and not be scary?”

“I don’t think any of you are scary,” James grunts.

“And debating ethics isn’t making us any more intimidating,” Remus remarks.

Lily scrapes a thumbnail under her knuckle to dislodge a bit of dry blood. “Good. Not-intimidating is what we’re going for, remember?”

“I agree with James. I don’t think any of us have to put in an effort for not-intimidating,” Dorcas says.

“Hey, I didn’t include myself,” James protests. “I inflict fear wherever I go. My enemies quiver at the sight of me.”

Dorcas laughs. “You inflict mild body odor. A lesser-known hex, but very affective.”

“It’s ‘effective’,” Remus corrects.

“I know, I just said it was.”

“Don’t you start complaining about me either, Moony,” James says, before seeming to remember he’s meant to be ignoring him and looking away with a frown.

“I wasn’t!” Remus protests. “It was a grammar thing. You’d learn it at school.”

“I didn’t know you went to a grammar school, Remus,” Lily says while not paying any attention at all, staring at the tracks. Nothing yet. But soon.

“No, they don’t have those in Wales. And we grew up broke.”

“‘Broke’ is slang. It’s ungrammatical,” Dorcas grumbles.

James leans close to her and whispers, loud enough that they can all hear it, “You’re not being subtle about not liking Remus, you know.”

Remus snorts, not quite a laugh; perhaps an aborted sigh; there are almost tears in it.

Lily clears her throat loudly. “I can see it.”

They all lean out to watch the tracks. The tiny red dot of the approaching train looms down the tracks, too far to make out any details but its colour, the colour of a nightmare. Birds scatter from the trees as it cuts through the forest, abysmally loud. Bloody industrial revolution technology. Lily really hates muggles sometimes.

“Okay,” she murmurs. “Nobody move until it’s almost all the way gone. Then we...”

She trails off, unsure.

“We’ll figure it out on the way,” Dorcas finishes.

“On the way from here to there?” Remus asks, gesturing from where they’re sitting to the tracks two feet away.

“Yeah.”

“Right.” He looks down at the ground. Lily knows what he’s thinking without having to look at him; that he’s very tired of having other people elect to risk his own life for him.

James shuffles, leaves cracking under him. "Just like old times," he murmurs, jacket creaking around him.

"Just like old times," Lily agrees. The train chugs closer. Fifty feet away. Forty. Thirty. She draws a long breath and lets it out through her nose, flaring her nostrils. "This time," she advises, "aim for the eyes."

She hears rather than sees James nod. The sound of the train becomes deafening; its red-gold front plate descends towards them, large and larger and then whistling past. The drivers' carriage rattles over them and they all duck their heads low. The sun has come out in patches and it reflects brightness down over them from the windows, flashing in the daylight. Lily keeps her head low, only chancing a glance up for a moment. She just prays some nosy Pureblood isn't peering out of the window at the wrong moment.

"Ten minutes," she murmurs, and pushes herself up into a low crouch. Carriages flash by in a red-gold blur. "Get ready."

Dorcas elbows her, hands hovering palm-up in front of her. "How long?"

"Five," Lily says. "Four. Three--"

The final carriage screams up alongside them; the world seems to slow.

"One!" Lily shouts, and lunges in a blur across the grass, throwing her hands against the side of the train.

And they stick hard. The impact whisks her off her feet, jarring one of her ankles. One moment Lily is on solid ground and the next she is pressed hard to the metal side of

the train, feet dangling, wind screaming over her face. She bends her elbows tight outwards, shouting out once with the fierce pain of it, and then wrenches one hand loose from the metal plating and hurls it over the top of the carriage to pull herself up on top.

She'll be ashamed of it later, but not for a moment does she look back; she forgets Dorcas, James and Remus are even there. All that exists then, clinging to the ledge atop the carriage, body hanging over open air, is Lily and the wind. Lily and the beating of her own heart, hard enough that she thinks it must be audible inside the carriage, pounding though the metal. Lily and the earth below her, how Icarus must have seen the world before he fell.

"Shit!" Lily grunts, and rolls over onto the top of the carriage.

She lies there gasping for a moment, looking up into the pearly sky. The wind tears through her clothing. *You're alive. You are alive. Be this the whetstone of your sword.*

"A little help?!" Dorcas' voice calls from below.

"Oh!" Lily shouts. She sits upright and the wind threatens to bowl her over. She presses into it, threatens to tear it wide open, and then she rolls over and throws an arm over the side to grab Dorcas by the wrist, pulling her up.

Dorcas clings to her arm, their wrists pressed together, her feet scrabbling across the metal side. Her jacket buffets in the wind, mourning draperies. Her wide eyes meet Lily's and Lily hauls her up atop the train; they collapse together, panting, gasping.

A hand comes over the side, pale and scarred and thick with goop. Remus makes a pained, distant sound from

below.

“Remus?!” Lily calls, as Dorcas rolls off her.

“Help me--!” he grunts, almost a shout.

Lily crawls to the edge. The rushing wind threads through her clothes -- below, Remus is clinging on by one hand, his other holding James, whose feet are planted on a plate of metal right over the spinning wheels, his heels inches from the ground.

“Oh, fuck off,” Lily sighs. She grabs Remus by the arm and pulls hard. Dorcas puts her arms around Lily’s waist and pulls too.

As one, they haul James and Remus onto the roof of the carriage. There they all lie in a gasping, breathy heap for a few seconds, collapsed atop one another, limbs tangled in tight sailors knots as if they will drag each other to sea.

“This was a terrible idea,” Remus wheezes.

“Someone definitely heard that,” Dorcas adds.

Lily heaves herself away from their great mass. She hacks up a glob of spit onto her hands. “Water dislodges it,” she says, rubbing them together, picking off the yellow sludge. “Quickly. Nine minutes, by now.”

They all spit on and rub at their hands for a few scarce moments. The clock is ticking.

“Okay, fuck it,” Lily says. She crawls over James and Remus and right to the back end of the carriage, peering precariously over the back.

There's a narrow metal ledge down there, a thin alcove. Big enough to stand on. Lily turns to crouch on the edge of the carriage rooftop, hands grasped around its rim, facing Dorcas, James and Remus.

"What are you going to do?" Remus asks.

Lily tightens her jaw. She palms one of her knives, clutching it tightly. "Follow me. Okay? I can't hold them off on my own, not for long."

James shuffles up into a crouch, swinging the bat from his shoulders. "You know I'd follow you anywhere," he says, with aching familiar cheer.

Lily rolls her eyes. Then, she swings her legs back off the ledge behind her-- she dangles for one terrifying moment in empty space-- the wind whistles through her, she drops down with only the grip of her arms keeping her from the ground-- she hurtles both feet into the carriage's back door in one great swinging motion which breaks it off its hinges and carries her sailing inside.

The door hits the floor with a clang. Lily goes staggering into the darkness of the carriage, blinking in the new light. The metal shudders under her. She steps off.

There are three seventh-years inside, smoking joints. They all stare.

"Hello," Lily greets, shaking out her twisted ankle, still aching from this morning.

"Who are you?" one of them asks, not looking very alarmed.

Lily raises her knife. *Eight and a half.* "You can stay here voluntarily, or I can make you."

They all glance at one another. They're still in muggle clothes; she can't tell which house they're in. Not Slytherin, by the lack of recognition. If they were proto-death eaters, they would've squealed by now.

"Uh, sure, man," one of them says. "Whatever."

James hurtles through the smashed-in entryway, brandishing his bat wildly. His boots clang on the fallen door. He stares, slowing down. "You've got it under control."

"Think so," Lily says mildly.

Remus drops down onto the ledge, then Dorcas, and they both shuffle inside. The seventh-years watch them in stunned silence.

"Stay here and smoke," Remus recommends, as the four of them head for the door into the next carriage. Dorcas grabs one of their blunts on the way past, takes a huff, then plants it back in the guy's hand. She shakes out her hands into fists, raising them in front of her.

Lily peers through the small window into the next carriage. It's one of the communal ones, stuffed with rows of chairs. A dozen or so students in there.

"Alright," she says. "Remus, you're up."

"I don't want to do this," Remus sighs, clicking the safety off his gun.

"Eight minutes," Lily warns.

Remus kicks the door down and fires three shots into the ceiling.

Immediately, there are screams. Dust rains from the ceiling. There is the sound of metal screeching. Kids dive down to hide under their chairs, shouting, arms over their heads. In the din, there is the distant sound of a caterwauling alarm.

Lily reaches into her pocket and pulls out her pouch of Peruvian darkness powder. She opens it and tosses the contents into the air, where they shimmer briefly, spun sugar, before expanding.

The world goes dark, all the light from the windows snuffed out. Lily grabs Dorcas. They stagger through the blackness together, tripping over something on the floor. A trunk or a body.

“Help!” she hears someone scream in the darkness. “Help me!” Friend or foe, Lily can’t tell.

The dark begins to dissipate. Someone hurtles down the carriage towards them; a spell flies past Lily’s ear.

James shoves by her. He hurls his bat in an underarm swing right into the death eater’s chin. With an awful crack, his jaw breaks. The man howls. Spots of light through the bullet holes in the ceiling illuminate him as he collapses against a row of seats.

James raises the bat and cracks it with both hands around in a great arc into the side of his head. The death eater slumps, bloody. Still.

“Alright!” James raises his voice to shout. “It’s your friendly neighbourhood runaway blood traitors here! Anyone who

reckons they'll die if they stay on this train, speak now or forever hold your piece!"

There is movement in the darkness. Lily wafts a hand through it and the last of the powder hangs like dust on the air before her, swirling through her fingers.

"Nobody?!" James calls.

A young boy staggers from under a seat. He finds his way shakily to his feet, holding both hands up in front of him. "Someone-- someone warned me," he says. "On the platform."

"Are your parents magical?"

"Uh, no, sir."

James claps his free hand on the boy's shoulder. "Come along then. You're safe with us."

"Seven minutes," Lily calls. "Let's move!"

Remus advances on the next carriage. He crashes in and most of the people inside are already curled under their seats. He fires three bullets through a window anyway, maybe just to announce his presence.

"Muggleborns!" he shouts. "Unless you want to die--"

A guard hurtles out from behind a seat, roaring. Pale with dark hair and a wide face. Remus dives to the floor and a red curse hits the wall and ricochets out of the broken window. Behind Lily, she hears James shout.

Dorcas pushes past her and marches right up to the death eater, fearless. She winds up and punches him right in the

nose.

"I've been waiting for that," she spits, and punches him again, and then again. He crashes against the side of a row of seats and Dorcas stamps her boot down on his leg like she could snap it, like he's a twig.

The guard howls with pain. He raises his wand. "Crucio--"

Dorcas dodges the curse by an inch. She takes his wand from him, cracks it over her knee and shoves one of the halves up his nose so hard he snorts out blood.

"You'll never hurt another kid again," she promises him, and cracks his head against a table.

Remus grabs her by the arm, pulling himself to his feet. "Six minutes," he groans. "Go, go, go."

James shoves in, the muggleborn kid from the first carriage tucked under his arm. "We're all still alive?"

"Just about," Lily says. She raises her voice to shout it again. "Last call for muggleborns! We're going to get you on a one-way trip to a sanctuary!"

A handful of kids clamber over the seats towards them. Three in total. James ushers them towards himself, cooing, asking questions, making jokes.

"We can do our own sorting if you want, once we get to Rostock!" Lily hears him tell them. "Just us. You look like a Gryffindor, you do. Brave and strong like us."

"Go," Lily says. "Come on."

The next carriage along is composed of individual compartments, all of their doors shut. Remus strides down the aisle, pounding an elbow into each, hard enough to rattle them.

“Muggleborns!” he shouts. “Muggleborns, this is your final call!”

Lily peers into each compartment. Mostly empty. There are a few occupied, with students crouched beneath the tables.

A kid comes hurtling out of one. “Please!” she screams. “They said they would kill me--”

Lily grabs her by the shoulders, very tight. “You’ll be fine,” she promises. “James!”

James takes the girl’s arm, grinning, false. “You mind taking care of the kids for a second Lils?” he asks, shockingly calm.

“Sure,” Lily says cautiously. “Why--”

James gestures up the carriage. Lily turns to look and all sound seems to leave the air.

There’s a death eater behind Remus, holding him by the upper arm like a human shield. He’s got the tip of his wand digging into the side of Remus’ neck and Remus is deadly still, staring at James and only James.

“Potter,” the death eater spits. He’s got this low, raspy, horrible voice. Authoritarian. “Closer now. Slowly.”

James steps in front of the kids, who Lily ushers behind her. He takes three long steps up the carriage towards them.

“Let him go,” he says. “And I’ll come with you.”

The death eater chuckles. "I'll be a war hero for this," he says, and presses the wand deeper into the side of Remus' throat.

Remus makes a choking noise. "Five minutes," he gasps.

"Let him go," James repeats. He tightens his grip on his bat. "Remus."

They seem to have a long, silent conversation, the two of them. Remus' face fills with anger and hate, and something devastated. Then he shakes his head violently.

"Remus," James says lowly. "Do it."

A pause. Remus takes a deep breath and Lily sees that look on his face again; he is bartering with his own life, he is not holding the cards. Then, he slides his gun out of his sleeve and fires down into the death eater's foot.

James swarms forward, a thundercloud. He catches Remus as he falls and throws him back down the aisle at Lily and then just starts fucking wailing on the death eater on the ground, hurtling his bat down into the guy's chest. Crunch crunch crunch.

Lily turns to the kids and kneels down to their level, shielding their view. She thinks fast, glancing in the compartment beside them. "We're going to stay in here, okay?" she says brightly. "Until we can get off the train."

Dorcas opens the door and ushers the kids inside, who all look terrified.

Down the hallway, Lily hears Remus say, "James! Merlin, James, stop!"

"Fuck you!" James howls, and the sound of the beating stops. He coughs, seeming to gather himself. "Fuck. Four minutes."

"We're running out of time," Lily says grimly. "Go. Go. Go."

James and Remus exchange looks. "Coming?" Remus asks.

Inside the carriage, Dorcas looks back at her. "I'll protect them," she says with fierce conviction.

"Okay," Lily says. "Get them onto the roof." Then, she turns and hurries to James and Remus. "Let's cause some shit."

James steps over the death eater's body. He wipes the blood on his bat off against the leg of his jeans.

"Christ," he mutters. Then, "Clock's ticking. We should start running."

They burst into the next compartment, which yields nothing, and then the next. Lily fends off a violent pack of Slytherin sixth-years with her knife and a snarl while James and Remus rescue two more muggleborn firsties from the next carriage down, trying to keep them calm as Lily screams profanities at the bastards, waving her bade in their faces to keep them back.

By the time they reach the front of the train, they are five death eaters down, with four more kids to show for it. James says, "I'll take them back, get them on the roof. Check the last few compartments."

Remus and Lily nod. James runs off down the hallway, a gaggle of tiny firsties following him like ducklings. It's almost cute except he just murdered someone which is less

cute, Lily feels a bit hysterical, she feels like she might pass out. The world spins. Slow-dancing.

Remus grabs her shoulder with a steadying hand, shakes her, lets her go. He pokes through the last dozen compartments on his own.

“There are so many less kids than there used to be,” he says. “One and a half minutes.”

“We’ll make it what it was again,” Lily promises, and slaps herself hard across the face to keep herself grounded.

“We’ll make it better.”

Remus shoots her a surprised look. Then he grins, soft and genuine.

“Yeah,” he agrees. “Now come on.”

They sprint all the way back to their temporary home base, the carriage with the death eater’s body in the doorway, propping the door open a bit. Remus steps over it and offers Lily a hand. She takes it because she feels like it is not a hand he’s offered her but an olive branch. She has a headache that could kill gods, pounding hot through her skull.

“We’ll go out of the window in there,” Remus instructs. “A minute.”

“You’re good at this time stuff.”

He shrugs. “Used to count the minutes on moons. It’s all I remember of them.”

Lily steps around the doorway into the compartment and freezes, dead still.

“Oh fuck,” she breathes.

“What?” Remus asks, reaching her side. Then he stills too.

The compartment is empty, all the kids already on the roof, except for James on one end and Peter Pettigrew on the other. They’re staring at each other. Peter has his wand out and James is staring like an idiot, not moving. The world feels frozen in place, a still-life painting. The sunlight streaming through the window fades and dies with the passing of a white cloud outside.

“Peter,” Remus whispers.

Lily doesn’t stop to think. She steps forwards and wrangles the bat out of James’ hands, pointing it at Peter, who is blocking the window

“Move,” she snaps.

“Lily!” James protests. “He’s not stopping us--”

“Thirty seconds,” Lily spits. “Is Dorcas up there?”

James nods, a bit frantic. “Ready to help them make the jump.”

Peter’s wide eyes flicker between their faces. “You can’t--you--” He doesn’t seem to know what to say.

Lily grabs him by the shoulder. Very firmly, she moves him out of the way of the window.

“Unless you’re coming with us, get out of our way. James,” she instructs. “Up.”

James is staring at Peter with this awful guilty look on his face. “Peter, I’m so sorry--”

Lily grabs him by the front of his robes. "I don't want to die here!" she shouts in his face, and in a hysteria, stronger than she feels, she throws him towards the window with enough force that he slams into it, rattles it.

Wide-eyed, James casts one last look at Peter and hooks his hands around the window ledge, clambering out and up to the roof with his clothes blustering in the wind. His feet disappear past the top of the window and he's gone, out into the open air.

"We've got no time," Remus murmurs. "Come with us, Pete. Come with us."

Peter just stares. His mouth works but he makes no sound.

"Peter," Remus pleads. "Peter, please."

"He's not coming," Lily snaps. And before either of them can say anything, "Remus, GO!"

Remus puts his face into his hands and shouts, once, into his palms. It's a terrible, agonised sound, like he has put every terrible thought he's ever had into it. Then he strides to the window, not looking back as he hauls himself out into the sunlight. He pulls himself onto the roof; James hand closes around his and pulls him up. He disappears.

"Sorry," Lily says. She hesitates, wanting to say more, unable to think.

Peter stares at her. "Sorry," he whispers back.

Lily nods to him. She follows Remus, leaving Peter standing there with his hands just a bit out in front of him, half-reaching. Still.

Just in time. The warehouse sits stoney and dark alongside the train tracks up ahead, growing closer by the second. James and Remus help Lily up onto the roof and she stands between them and feels them both shake against her shoulders. Cold air whips around them. The train rattles beneath their feet.

The kids are clustered on the roof of the next carriage with Dorcas. She nods to them all and then says to the kids, "When the rooftop gets closer, I need you to jump for me, okay? I need you to jump. It's only a foot across. I'll go with you. I promise it's going to be okay. It's going to be okay."

Lily takes James' hand in her own, Remus' in the other. "I'm sorry," she murmurs.

Neither of them seems able to speak. When she looks left and right at them, they look haunted, both of them, staring off the side of the train into the rushing green overgrowth below. Minds faraway.

"Shit," James murmurs. "Oh, Remus."

The rooftop swings up alongside them; the foliage gives way to cement grey. Overhead, the white sky seems to lurch. Lily takes a step back and does not let go of their hands as she jumps.

Perhaps not all the trust they built is gone; they both jump with her.

She lands hard on her feet, then falls to her knees, gasping with pain as gravel scuffs her shins. Remus rolls with the impact at her side, and James hits the ground on his side, swearing furiously.

"The kids okay?!" he raises his voice to call to Dorcas.

A pause. "Nothing broken!" she shouts back, from a pile of kids on the edge of the roof ten feet away.

"Well thank Merlin for that," James says. He sits up, brushing gravel out of his hair. He's crying, Lily notices. None of it has entered his voice, but he's crying, great fat tears running down his cheeks. Not shaking with it, not sobbing. Just crying, like quiet rain at night. She has never known him to be so inexpressive before when upset.

Remus sits up, wincing and clutching at his back, where something must have jarred. He looks hollow. Nothing in there.

"Are you okay?" he asks Lily, not seeming to be in search of an answer.

Lily nods, wincing. She shoves her knife, unbloodied (she has not killed today; she has to keep reminding herself of it. She has not killed today, she did not take a life), back into her pocket and stares after the train.

And then James grabs her arm. Hard.

"Oh Merlin," he whispers. "Look." And he points.

The red Hogwarts Express is already a distant streak, slipping farther away with each moment. But as Lily squints (and her eyesight is very good), she thinks she can see it; and yes, she can; Peter is halfway out of the window, hanging out over the flashing world below him. Waving frantically, precariously. As if to say, *come back for me. Don't go.*

The train whips around a corner and out of sight.

My Dearest James,

~~*I'm sorry about what h*~~

~~*Do you think we might be able to get Peter from Hogw*~~

~~*Are you angry with m*~~

~~*I don't know why I did that but I*~~

~~*Sorry*~~

*I hope we see each other again soon. Write to me in
Rostock, okay?*

Yours (regretfully), Lily

Chapter End Notes

- [Official Tumblr](#)
- [Twitter Quotes Bot](#) (admin: [lupinlesbian](#))
- [Pinterest Board](#) (admin: [plantfeline](#))
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a comment or an [ask](#)!

EVIL GENIUSES

Chapter Notes

hewwo loves....this one was so fun to write!! yells!!
enjoy!! things are really coming together now....

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“...And since the raid on the Hogwarts Express two weeks ago, we’re happy to report that all the rescued muggleborn students have been relocated to Rostock Sanctuary,” the host is saying. “Fantastic work they’re doing over there, truly. We can’t be more thankful. Now, for the less fortunate news, we’ll move onto the deathlist for the week...”

“Turn that thing off,” Marlene says as she steps out of the trees, tucking her lighter into her pocket. She snorts a bit of ash out of her nose.

Regulus casts a glance at her. “It’s not that bad,” he says.

“I don’t want to hear another deathlist. And it’s not really the time.”

“You’re the one who chose to burn it on *Direct Action* night,” Regulus responds, but he turns the radio off on the top and shoves it into his jacket. He’s sitting cross-legged in the dirt. They’re about half a mile away from The Mill and Millicent, which is a great fireball as bright and hot as the sun through the trees.

Marlene sits down beside him. “You barely helped this time,” she accuses, not meaning it.

“Aside from making sure there was nobody in there?”

“Not my top priority.”

“You’re a psychopath,” Regulus tells her. “There’s no heart in there.”

“Oh, come off it. It’s not yours either.”

He shrugs. “I’m more willing to hear the deathlist out than you.”

“That’s sort of worse.”

“Maybe.” He digs a hard line with the nail of his index finger down the joint sticking out of the top of his wrist, until it goes red and blood-wrought, dark against the pale expanse of his skin.

Marlene leans back to lie in the dirt. “They’ll start searching the trees soon,” she says conversationally.

Regulus lies back too. They both stare at the sky through the heavy dark spires of trees, high and thin around them.

“Yeah,” he agrees. “We should move.”

“Next hit’s risky enough that we’ll probably have to get past some guards.”

“Exciting,” Regulus remarks.

Marlene nods. She digs a hand into her pocket and wraps a fist around her knife, squeezing it. “I agree.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she watches Regulus reach slowly into his own jacket, grabbing his blade very tight. His arm goes taut with tension, the tendon of his wrist sticking out. They both lie there for some time, quiet and uncomfortable, holding their weapons close just in case

someone comes through the trees. Or just in case the other lunges for them.

It has been like this for some time. Almost two months. Three more hits since Regulus arrived, and they haven't been caught yet, which Marlene considers on some days to have been dumb luck, and on others to have been divine intervention, and on others still to have been a result of her marvelous brain at work.

"You know," Regulus says after a while, "You can talk about it to me. If you want."

Marlene sits bolt upright. "That's not funny."

He cracks up laughing. "It sort of is."

Huffing out of her nose, Marlene stands up. She pulls her knife out and flips it in her hand twice. "This isn't a fight you can win."

"I could make you bleed a bit. Ruin your clothes, you know," Regulus offers. He stands up. "Sorry if that hit a bit close to home."

"Oh, shut up."

He laughs still. It has become a joke between them, a gallows-humour, *we may die here* sort of joke. Mary's dead and it's easier to marionette her corpse around between them than to hold a fucking vigil.

Marlene shoves him hard enough that he almost falls over, stupid skinny knobbly knees knocking together. He shoves her right back.

"Come on," she tells him. "Let's get out of here."

Regulus follows her through the trees, both of them holding their weapons out in front of them, neither speaking.

Marlene feels like an exposed wire. Like any touch could set her off. She knows she's got ash on her face and imagines that it makes her look tough. Intimidating. If it doesn't, may the knife do the trick, she supposes, and tightens her grip on it still.

Slovenia is very still. It lies cold and beautiful this autumn, thick with green trees and broad lakes, like no place Marlene has ever seen. There are mountains on every horizon, as far as the eye can see, and it makes the world feel boxy, like if you ran you would always end up running out of road. It's a hotspot for death eater strongholds, and they've got a laundry list of places to hit here, but it was Regulus' idea to start with the Mill and Milicent, a wizarding pub in an English-speaking area, dominated by German wizarding apostates shunted to the south by Grindelwald's defeat. Blood purist scum without the titles or land to call themselves nobility, but not poor by any stretch either. Marlene hopes that as they watch their crappy pub burn, they fear it's only the beginning. Little do they know what's coming to them.

"We're still staying at that hostel you picked out?" Regulus asks her, as they trek through the heavy trees. Far behind them, smoke blackens the empty grey sky.

"Yeah," Marlene confirms. "It's far enough out of the way of wizarding territory that they won't look."

"I know that. I heard you the first time. You know I do listen to the things you say."

"Some of the time."

"I remember the last book you read," Regulus defends. "I remember what you wore yesterday. I pay attention to things."

Marlene hums. "Perhaps you should pay less attention to the things I wear and more to where you're stepping."

"What?"

She trips him up. Regulus goes flying to the ground and almost stabs himself with his own knife, grunting. He pulls the blade from under him and he promptly rolls over and sticks it right into Marlene's shin.

"Shit!" she yells, and pulls it out, spattering blood with the backswing across Regulus' face. "You little cunt."

Regulus grins at her with yellowish teeth. "Watch where you're stepping too."

Marlene wheels back her foot and kicks him once in the shoulder, hard enough to send him rolling through the dust. Then, she reaches into her pocket and pulls out a roll of bandages, wrapping them tight and haphazard around her bleeding leg, on the outside of her clothes. It'll probably get infected and she doesn't have the presence to really care.

"Little prick," she snaps. "I'll get you back for that one."

Regulus pulls himself to his feet and spits out a mouthful of dirt. "I think you dislocated my shoulder," he groans. "Pop it back in for me?"

"No. You get to live with your mistakes."

He hacks up another glob of black dust and hoicks it at her. It lands on the front of Marlene's jacket and she wipes it off

with her sleeve.

Most days are like this.

“Come on,” Marlene says, and tests her weight on her injured leg. “I’ll fix it at the motel.”

“It’s three miles away.”

“Better get walking then.”

Regulus sighs. “I’ll pop it in myself.”

Dorcas,

~~*It’s getting colder already! It feels like summer left too qui*~~

~~*There’s this quote I read in a book the other day, it reminded me of you. It goes, ‘What delight! What felicity! You give me fresh life and vigour. Adieu to disappointment and spleen. What are men to rocks and mountains?’ What ARE men to rocks and mountains? Nothing to us, anyway. Or they weren’t. I don’t know what to s*~~

~~*I’ve been thinking of you a lot late!*~~

~~*I’m trying not to lie.*~~

In the end, Marlene puts his shoulder back in place for him. He whaps her upside the head for her troubles and she hits him right back. They walk all the way to Kamnik in comfortable silence.

Violence is a language familiar to both of them. Regulus told her once, a few weeks ago, that his mother threw him all

the way down the stairs when he was eleven and he broke a handful of bones. Marlene laughed and he laughed too.

They sleep well that night, proud of the day's work, tucked into a bunk bed in the hostel. Marlene takes the top bed and Regulus the bottom one, and he only comes awake gasping and heaving twice in the night, not shouting out or making a scene. They can't afford to draw attention and even in sleep he seems to know that, which Marlene appreciates. At least he can do something right.

They eat breakfast bought with stolen money the following morning, standing under the awning of a closed-down bike shop on the corner at the edge of town. Regulus chews on an apple and Marlene tears chunks out of a stale half-loaf of white bread and eats until she is more than full.

"You want me to go scope out our next hit today?" Regulus asks, rolling an apple pip between his fingers like he'd very much like to bury it in one of his little cuts.

Marlene considers that. "It'll be dangerous today."

"It always is."

"That's the spirit. It's a train ride out," she warns.

Regulus takes the pip between his teeth and crunches it. A little taste of cyanide. He is holding death in his hands like Eve.

"I'll jump the turnstile," he says. "What are you doing today?"

"I'm going to buy petrol," Marlene sniffs. "They've got a hardware place somewhere in this town, I asked someone

about it on the bus the other day. And I need a new lighter, too.”

She feels Regulus watching her. “It’ll be dangerous today,” he echoes back to her.

Marlene shrugs. “I’ve almost run out of paper, too. So it’ll have to be today.”

“No wonder you’ve run out, for all of it you throw away.”

“I’m nothing if not persistent.” It’s a lie; Marlene is one of the least persistent people she knows. She’ll bite once and not again. But it’s a decent excuse for someone who doesn’t know her very well, and if there’s anybody in the world who doesn’t understand her, it’s Regulus Black.

He nods. “Then go for it. If you die, I’m abandoning our great Bonney-and-Clyde arsonist shtick and taking a flight to Australia to live out my days as a hermit.”

Marlene considers that, swallowing the last of the bread. Quick as a whip, she snaps her hands up to the side of Regulus’ face and claps, right beside his ear. He flinches so hard he drops his apple. It rolls away down the road.

“Ha,” she says. “You wouldn’t be able to stick the fugitive life.”

“We’re already living the fugitive life,” Regulus scowls, running a hand through his hair. It’s in need of a cut.

“Yes, but we’re living it in a different county every week. It’s less paralysing that way.”

“Speak for yourself. I would take being an national fugitive over being an international one any day,” Regulus replies,

staring pensively out past the road and to the lake stretching beyond the town. The still, flat surface of it gleams in the rising sun, and it seems to stretch out forever, out and out to distant mountains rising like monoliths, small gods, into the clear heavens.

"That explains why you're still here," Marlene replies smartly.

Regulus kicks her hard, the toe of his boot digging in. "If anyone asks us, you're holding me hostage. You took me against my will and you're forcing me to help you on your wild, criminal escapades. I didn't start the fire."

"Says the one who stabbed me last night."

"An escape attempt. You cracked my shoulder out."

"You almost broke my nose last week."

"The operative word being 'almost'. Last time I checked, they don't lock up 'almost' criminals."

"You should ask someone about what attempted murder is."

"Well, if I go down for it, you're going down with me," he replies, and then wraps his arms tight around himself, shivering even though it's a warm day. "I need a new coat. Steal one for me?"

"You forced my hand," Marlene mocks. "You're taking me against my will to help you on your wild, criminal escapades. I didn't start the fire."

"That's a yes?"

“Do a good job scouting the base out, and I’ll consider it,” Marlene agrees. “It’s not even a cold day. You know we might have to go north at some point, right? There are some real bastards in Denmark, I’ve heard. And Norway. The people who run Durmstrang, that type.”

Regulus goes still for a moment, deadly so, almost paralysed. “Maybe we can split up for that,” he says. “I’m not going back to Norway.”

Marlene pokes at that tension, digs knuckles in tight. “You scared?”

“You know me. I’m scared of everything.” He’s joking. Joking despite the change in his voice, in his face. Dancing his own corpse around this time, which is a refreshing change.

“I was aware,” Marlene says dryly. “What happened there, anyway?”

Regulus is no longer joking as he says, “I’m going to get on the train,” and steps away from her.

“Regulus--”

But he’s already striding off down the street, no hesitation in it. Marlene stares after him, unsure whether to shout after him. *Coward*, perhaps. *Get back here*. Or maybe, *the trains don’t run this early*.

In the end she says nothing.

The hardware shop is right on the other end of the town. Kamnik itself is tiny, barely fifteen hundred people to it.

Marlene grew up in a small town, in Northern Ireland until the Troubles broke her family into small chunks and she and her mother and uncles ended up in northern England. She's used to small places, liminal spaces, how people eye you like a stranger when you don't look like you belong, so she doesn't pay it any mind as she strolls through the streets to her destination.

By the time she finds the place, it's mid-morning. The sky is absent of any clutter here, almost never cloudy. The sun is always hard to find. Hiding behind some mountain somewhere. It makes the world feel very empty. It's going to be a warm day; not hot but not cold either, it'll be.

A scuffed backroad leads to the line of industrial trade etched along the west end of the town, thick with overgrown brown weeds and heavy, dappled grey stones, small lines of them, scattered like crops. Marlene catches a glimpse of herself in the glass storefront as she approaches and doesn't recognise herself for a moment. She walks with her legs further apart than she used to, set at shoulder-width to keep herself sturdy. Sallow-faced and heavy-footed, she looks like a ghost washed up on the shores of the lake. Something the fucking mountain lions dragged in.

A bit unsettled, she reaches the door and opens it slowly, reaching up to keep the bell above the door from ringing.

The inside isn't pretty, the high ceiling thick with metal pipes and brash foil-like insulation, bulging in heavy clumps through gaps in the tiling. There are half a dozen tight-pressed aisles, full of sheets of material, tools, nails, rope.

Marlene can't see anyone around; she glances at the desk at the back, for checking out items, and it's empty. The air is very still.

Shoving her hands into her pockets, she starts towards the last aisle along, which will put her out of sight of the doors. Perhaps today she'll get lucky and not have to whittle away so much of their dwindling funds after all.

The back aisle is all fishing materials. Nets, reels, lines, poles, bait. It stinks. There's a row of heavy, dark canvas jackets against the back wall, presumably for going out boating with. Marlene occupies herself fumbling through them, glancing at the price tags. Out of her range, but hey, that's never stopped her. She glances around again. Still, there's nobody around. No staff, no customers.

With one hand, Marlene pulls one jacket off the hook and shuffles it around her shoulders, shoving her hands through the arms. There's a thin mirror beside the rack and she looks at herself and almost laughs. It's far too big for her, the lapels folded back, the neckline flipped up. The coat hangs halfway down her calves. It makes her shapeless. A flat, canvas-textured shadow. A weary fisherman. Something that is not her.

"Huh," she murmurs, and fumbles her fingers along the sleeve, feeling it between her fingers. It won't provide much warmth, but it's got a hood. She looks larger than she is in it. Stronger.

The bell rings.

Marlene freezes. Very slowly, she turns on her heel and ducks down behind the end of the aisle, then peers around it towards the front door.

There's a figure stepping inside, in a canvas jacket much like her own. Sloping shoulders and long, gangly legs. A teenager, made blurry and dark by the light behind him.

From behind the desk across the shop, a worker pops up, obviously having been in a basement storeroom. She says something in Slovene.

“Uh,” the teenager replies. British accent. “I don’t.” He gestures vaguely.

“Ah.” The worker clears her throat. “I help?”

“I’m okay, thank you,” the teen says quickly. He gestures to the wall beside the door, hung thick with cables and chains, like the type you’d tie your bike up with. “I can, uh. Um.”

The worker nods, looking mildly uncomfortable, before clunking back downstairs again.

Marlene breathes out once, slowly, and then back in. Very silently, she slips from this aisle to the next. She hesitates and reaches out a hand to snag a heavy tank of petrol from the bottom shelf. It must be six litres at least; it weighs her down and she staggers a bit, feet thumping the floor.

The teenager looks around, blinking. Marlene barely gets out of the way in time, panting, holding the handle tight in both hands as she hovers against the back wall, hidden. Waiting.

She hears him hesitate and then turn back to the wall.

“Fuck,” Marlene breathes. Tenuously slowly, she creeps back to the very back aisle and ducks down there, out of sight. She can wait for him to go and then make her escape.

The kid takes an inordinately long amount of time to pick out a chain, and then doesn’t just pick one; he takes a whole long loop of bicycle chain off the wall and counts out the

metres. Like he's trying to get as much as possible. Eventually, he loops the whole thing into a coil and hauls it over to the front desk, dropping it on there gently.

"Hello?" he calls. "I'm ready to pay."

Marlene peers out at him again. She watches him turn to look out of the front windows, and then— then she recognises him.

It's Remus fucking Lupin.

"Oh, you motherfucker," she whispers.

The shop attendant climbs out of the basement again, wiping her forehead with the back of her hand. She stares from the chains back up at Lupin, and then shrugs and rings him up.

Marlene can't hear them talk, can't even hear the birds outside, the lake rushing; all she can hear is the fierce, dark pounding of her heart between her lungs. It whips up a great roaring in her ears, so loud she can hear nothing past it. She feels her pulse jumping in her neck.

Chains. Remus, here, after last night. It all makes too much sense.

She watches him wave a hand in thanks to the attendant before wrapping the chains in a great loop around his arm and heaving them off the table. Lupin staggers to the door and elbows it open, disappearing into the brightness of the vacant morning.

The attendant watches him with narrow eyes for a while, before going back down to the storeroom again, leaving Marlene alone.

Marlene no longer wants to look like a fisherman, she decides, as she stands up and jogs for the door, stepping into the sunlight with her petrol in one hand, the coat cold around her shoulders. She wants to look like a tropical storm. She wants to look tempestuous. Squalling.

She stands in the light of day for a few moments, blinking into the sunlight and at the empty road, and then decides that she doesn't care if they catch her; she turns around and goes back in for more petrol. And, she supposes, a coat for Regulus too.

They reconvene by the lake. It feels very duplicitous, like they're meeting to trade bags of coke or something similarly more fun than the reality of their situation. Marlene gets there first and sits with her legs dangling from the seawall, arms folded around the railings, waiting for him. The morning slides into afternoon. Boats glide silent and gentle from the lakeside towards the horizon, far away, greener than this side. Her petrol tanks sit on either side of her.

"I got you paper," Regulus greets as he sits beside her, sticking his legs out over the end and kicking the backs of his heels against the wall. He crosses his arms on the middle railing, mirroring her. "I figured you'd forget."

"I did," Marlene admits. "I got you a coat."

They watch each other. Regulus pulls out a sheaf of yellow paper, wrapped in brown twain. Marlene tugs the rolled-up fisherman's coat from her lap, matching her own. Like a hostage exchange, they snatch each other's spoils at the same moment.

Marlene runs a thumb over the yellow paper. "Thanks."

"Thanks yourself." Regulus sniffs contemptuously, pulling the coat on. They match. "This is too big for me."

"Don't complain about things you can't do anything about."

"That's why I spend most of my time complaining about you," he jibes, and waves the knife in his sleeve at her.

Marlene hasn't been afraid he'll slit her throat in her sleep for a few weeks now, but he doesn't need to know that. Putting your guard down puts you in prime position to get fucked over and she's not in the business of choking on her own blood; not yet, anyway.

"I thought it was just because you enjoy biting the hand," she snipes.

Regulus shrugs. "Never had a hand before."

"The Blacks are millionaires."

"And I never exactly had a trust fund."

"Suppose that would've been your brother," she admits.

Regulus considers that. He shrugs, balling cut-up hands into the coat. "Well, I'm not the spare anymore."

"You think you'll go back and take up the mantle someday?"

"Merlin, no. Let that family rot."

Marlene hums. "I didn't think you thought that."

"I didn't think that," Regulus says shortly. "I do now."

She watches him out of the corner of her eye, running the pad of her thumb up and down the edge of the paper, almost willing a papercut into it. Regulus keeps battering his heels into the wall, child-like, and doesn't look back at her, eyes weighing down on the lake, glued to a distant, hazy horizon which the mist soon will swallow.

"We should get drunk sometime," she says. "You'll cry like a baby about it all and then I'll have blackmail."

"You've already got plenty of blackmail," Regulus protests.

"Like how your regular blood treachery has ascended international borders and accrued about a million euros of property damage," Marlene agrees thoughtfully.

"That's a low estimate."

"That's because I'm taking most of the credit there."

Regulus laughs through his nose. A bit like when air goes out of a dead person.

"I've got blackmail on you too," he offers. "I read your letters when you throw them away."

"You think I don't know that?" Marlene asks, even though she didn't until he mentioned it. "You're not as subtle as you think you are."

He nods, like he's taking on board the criticism of his shoddy execution of duplicity so he can do it better next time. "You quote things a lot. Books I know you haven't read."

"I've read 'Pride and Prejudice'," Marlene defends.

“Yeah, but not recently.”

“The quote stuck with me.”

Regulus shrugs a shoulder. “You should try to speak with your own face on,” he says after a short pause. “Without a quote to put someone else’s words in your own mouth.”

“I didn’t ask for you to psychoanalyse me.”

“Better than divination, isn’t it? I’d rather the muggles overdiagnose me than the wizards tell me death is hunting me. I would always get the grim,” Regulus says morosely.

“Me too,” Marlene lies.

“Well,” he replies, “if we are being chased by death, she’ll have to wait until we’re done getting away from these men first.”

Marlene claps her hands. “What do you know? Regale me.”

“Unsavoury folks. It’s not a large complex. An old manor house, converted from a church. 1800s, perhaps earlier. The rafters aren’t charmed to hold up, I checked. It should catch alight easily, if we start it on the roof.”

“It’ll be tricky,” Marlene says.

“So you want another way?”

“Of course not. Keep going.”

Regulus clears his throat. “It’s isolated,” he says. “On the far side of a river, five miles from the estuary the train stops at. A long walk, and a lot of forest to hide in. It’ll have to be in and out. They’ve got guards.”

“Stupid-looking ones?”

“Oh, just the stupidest.”

“Perfect,” Marlene remarks. “What else?”

“Two floors and a basement,” Regulus rattles off. “Flat roof. The mortar’s old, pre-war the last time it was redone, so it’ll burn easily. Muggle-made, which tipped me off that the place is stolen, not an ancestral home.”

“None of these bastards have the money for ancestral homes.”

“Or the class,” Regulus sniffs. “They’ve only been based there for ten years, fifteen at a stretch. Rotating cast of clowns, too. I think it works as a stronghold for whichever big one is in the area at the time. It’s death eaters in there right now.”

He looks at her then, full in the face. Rare for the both of them, for their incessant push-and-pull, how cruel the grinding rhythm of their distrust can be.

“They’ve got prisoners in the basement,” he says. “I think. I can’t be sure, but it sounded like it.”

Marlene doesn’t know what to say for a moment. It takes every inch of her willpower not to ball her fists up in her lap. She searches Regulus’ face. He searches hers right back and does not look away.

Eventually, she raises her chin. “And?”

“My thoughts exactly,” Regulus agrees simply.

“I didn’t think so.”

He shrugs. "Whatever they've done to get in that basement, they'll die anyway. With the security of the place... they're not civilians. Order members, maybe. Probably not, but maybe."

"Speaking of which," Marlene puts in. "Remus Lupin is here."

Regulus stares. "What?"

"I saw him in the hardware shop. He didn't see me."

"Merlin."

"He was buying chains," Marlene says, frowning. "Metal chains."

Regulus turns to look at the ocean. "You think he's hunting us."

"It makes sense for the Order to send someone after us. They're too noble for this shit. And... he's with the Order... I think he might be here with Dorcas." Marlene swallows. "To bring me back."

"Well," Regulus says, with very blunt simplicity. "It doesn't make much sense. They wouldn't send him to chain you up and drag you home. We're wizards."

"Nobody can use magic. They would if they wanted me smuggled back over international borders."

"How would they know the arson was you?"

"Dorcas knows," Marlene says immediately. "She knows me well enough. She's figured it out."

She can't know that for sure, but it's a nice thought.

Regulus looks dubious. "Why would they send two teenagers, then? Especially a werewolf."

"Since when has the Order made good decisions?"

"Fair," Regulus admits. "It still doesn't sound plausible to me."

"I'm just saying that we should keep our guard up."

"And I'm just saying that you're getting paranoid."

Marlene barks a laugh. "You say that like I wasn't paranoid before. And like you're not, too. We both eat, sleep, breathe paranoia."

Regulus, seeming to know he isn't going to win this argument, sighs. "Speaking of paranoia," he says. "They've got spikes on the roof. We'll have to do something about that."

"Hmm."

"My thoughts exactly."

Marlene clicks her fingers. "You can climb a tree," she says. "Take a big stick, lean across, drape some insulation across it. We can steal some. That fluffy brown shit they use to isolate sound."

He stares. "Are you crazy?"

"It'll make us quiet, too. And it burns quick."

"The spikes will go right through."

"I won't need to be up there long. Five minutes, probably less."

Regulus shakes his head. "We need to deal with the guards too. We would do better with another person."

"Unless you want to go employ the werewolf, I think we're stuck with just the two of us."

He exhales heavily. "At least I'm needed. A downpayment on our continued survival. Life insurance."

"That's what I will be referring to you as from now on."

"Oh joy. Objectification."

"It's what you get for reading my letters," Marlene responds. She heaves herself to her feet. There isn't a lick of wind on the air today, but she leans against the railing and wills it to rush through her anyway, cold and unable to forgive.

Regulus stands too. "We do it on Sunday night," he says. "There'll be less people then."

"I don't think they're the religious type."

He shakes his head. "If they go out poaching for muggles, it'll be then."

Marlene stares at him. Then she laughs, half disbelieving, a cold swell rushing over her. "Christ, I hate you pureblood monsters. I hate every one of you."

"It's just tradition to do it on Sundays. I didn't make it."

"I'd kill you if I didn't need you, you know that?"

"It's a wonder I haven't done it myself," Regulus responds, looking a bit lost even as he says it, as if he's not sure that

he means it. One of his hands goes up the other sleeve to dig a great divot into the flesh of his forearm.

“Come on. Hostel. We’ll plan out the small details.”

Regulus nods. He turns to watch the lake one last time. When Marlene looks him in the face, he has an expression like he’s staring down an old enemy. Inevitability. She’s tempted to push him right back into the cold black water.

Dorcas,

Feels weird writing to you now. I saw Lupin earlier. Did you know he’s here? Are you with him? I don’t know who I’m asking. Perhaps the vague spectre of you that exists in my head. You are as much a ghost as she is now. I dreamt that I drowned you last night. You bloated like a dead fish.

Regulus said I shouldn’t talk with someone else’s face on. I don’t see how his advice is worth anything, since it’s his nightmares I’m having now. Sometimes I wonder if he dreams of fire in turn. We aren’t alike, me and him, but I worry that we’re becoming similar, our awful twisted selves all knotted up in each other, this horrible symbiotic mess we have created. He is lying more. I can tell. We try to kill each other everyday and we’ve been trying harder since Autumn started.

I should be careful when I throw this one out. I’ll say this, to the you that I’m writing to, this character in my head who exists in the common room, by the window, writing to your parents in broken something-or-other. I never asked the language. I never asked a lot of things. I’ll say this to you: do yourself a favour, and don’t find me.

- Marlene.

PS: Proud of me? Nothing crossed out. Except this: ~~we might kill this time. And I am not afraid of it. I am not afraid of anything. Except you.~~

"I despise you," Regulus says. "I despise you, and your fucking games."

"Get in the tree."

"I've never climbed a tree in my life."

"Seriously?"

Regulus squints at her. "I grew up with Walburga Black as a mother," he snaps. "I learned how to stitch my own wounds before I learned how to tie my own shoelaces."

"And what age were you then? Sixteen?" Marlene mocks.

He spits at her. "Eleven."

"Talk to a shrink," she recommends. "I'll find you one myself. After you get in the tree."

Regulus grits his teeth, staring from Marlene to the tall oak. Then, all the air seems to go out of him.

"Help me," he snaps.

Marlene shuffles over and drops to one knee, linking her hands together over it, palms up. "Step on."

Regulus blinks at her and then obliges. She lifts him and they wobble for a moment, both of them, before his hand finds a branch above and he pulls himself up onto it.

Grey daylight peeters through the leaves overhead. They're just inside the copse of dark evergreens that surrounds the Sedem Delov house, out of sight of the guards stationed outside the huge wooden doors at the front. The building is tall, narrow and stocky. It stands like a matchstick against the sky.

"Lay it down," Marlene instructs. "Get up there. Spread the petrol. Then pull the tripwire. And then stay fucking put. Got it?"

Above her, Regulus' shadowed face twists. "If I die here, I will haunt you," he says. "I'm not joking. I'll follow you as a ghost until-- until--"

"Until I die too," Marlene replies. "Won't be long now. We can annoy each other in the afterlife. Making each other miserable for the rest of our days."

He spits again, and misses her again. Then, he turns to look up, foot finding another branch, sloped towards the sky. Regulus begins to climb.

Marlene shakes the tension out of her hands. She looks away from him; if he falls and snaps his neck, she would rather not see, though she'd never tell him that. Very quietly, she pads to the treeline, stooping under a raised, wizened root at the base of a heavy old oak and peering out across the grass towards the house.

It has a basement alright; she can see it peeking from the weather-sunken foundations, raised ever so slightly from the ground. A wooden partition, the house's floor and the cellar's ceiling, splits it from the higher walls. The stone there is paler, not aged by sunlight as much as the rest of the house. A wine cellar back in the old days before the war. Now something far more valuable.

The guards don't look much like they want to be there. One looks half asleep, slumped leaning against the closed doors with his arms folded. The other is completely asleep, sitting on the ground with his back to the stone wall. Regulus was right about them looking stupid. The death eaters with any skill will all be in France now, managing the Accord. Managing PR for death eater prime too, Marlene suspects, since even *Direct Action* seems to have finally caught on to the fact that he's been suspiciously absent from the public eye as of late, and it takes about as long as is possible for them to catch on to much of anything.

There's a creak in the trees; Marlene glances over her shoulder. Regulus is high up, clambering down a thick bough towards the rooftop, where it juts into a patch of the forest thirty yards away. Easy pickings. Neither of the guards even looks up. Marlene thinks she could probably walk right up to them, douse them in petrol and set them alight and they wouldn't stop her in time.

Regulus reaches the very end of the bough, crouching to cling to it with both hands. Against the sky, he looks very still, fingers dug around the branch like the claws of a bird. Marlene watches the subtle flexing of his back, how he breathes in, then out.

Very gently, he pulls a hand off the bough. It creaks dangerously; he sways. For one tense moment, Marlene is sure he'll fall, but he doesn't, balancing perfectly. In a tenuous movement, he reaches back and over his shoulder and snares the slab of insulation from his backpack, pulling it out. The zip tears open and the huge mass of it expands against his jack, outside of its confines. One of the guards looks up for a moment and then back down, Regulus too far around the side of the house to see without turning their heads, which the guards are obviously too stupid to do.

Marlene's breath is caught in her throat; she can't dislodge it. She looks back at Regulus, who is holding the spongy insulation in one hand against his back. She wills him to *move, move, move, move.*

With uncharacteristic bravery, Regulus reaches out, throwing the insulation onto the spikes. Then he lunges from the end of the branch and lands on his knees on top of it.

He was right, as Marlene suspected he would be; the spikes pierce right through into his knees. She watches Regulus' mouth open inhumanly wide in a mercifully silent scream. He rolls off the spikes and onto the flat middle of the roof, gasping quietly with pain. There is blood on his hands as he clutches his legs with them.

Marlene almost feels bad. Almost. What she feels mostly is frustration. *Tripwire. Pull it. Pull it.*

Regulus lies there panting for almost too long, curled into a ball. Even from this far away, Marlene can pick apart the small details of him. Blueish skin, hair in need of a cut, mostly in his eyes. Knobbly wrists and bony hands covered in small cuts. It hits her that she has come to understand him better than she understands herself.

He drags himself to his feet and limps to the very edge of the roof. There is a pause in which he stares at Marlene with a very hard look on his face.

Marlene raises the tank of petrol at her side, as if to say, *cheers.*

Regulus flips her off. He raises the spool of wire from his pocket, leading back into the forest west of Marlene, and gives it a great tug.

There is a sound like a gunshot as the severed branch they cut down earlier falls through the trees and to the ground, cracking as it hits the rocky earth. Birds rise in a dark mass to the sky, a cloud of them.

Both guards' heads snap up. They begin speaking in low voices to each other. Slovene or Austrian. Perhaps Hungarian; Hungary isn't far from here.

Come on. Cowards. Go.

One guard, the taller, more awake one, pulls his colleague to his feet. They look at each other and then around through the trees, missing Marlene, because of course they missed Marlene; she's too good at this. Then, they set off into the trees west of her, across the grass right under Regulus. Into the undergrowth to see what the disturbance was.

Marlene doesn't stop to check both ways. She stands and leaps over the raised root, sprinting headlong across the grass to the doors. Wind whips her face and each footstep rings impact through her like a gunshot. Bam bam bam. With fumbling hands she uncaps her tank of petrol and tips it. Clear fuel pours, oily and globular, in great watery gulps from the opening.

There is no time to think of technique, to think of anything except time itself, time and the fire. Marlene jogs in a long circle from the doors to the hooking corner of the outer wall and around it, splashing petrol in great unhinged masses across the dark earth at the base of the house. It hits the wooden foundations and drips into the ground. Above, she can hear Regulus doing his own rounds, thinks she can hear his small noises of pain but cannot be sure of it. She makes it around the next corner and floods the pitted black earth

along the back of the house, and the far side too, the ground there scattered with torn chunks of industrial insulation, stuck in the grass like snow.

Regulus pours a great mass of fuel over the side, tripping it down the flat stone wall in a clinging trail. It connects Marlene's ring of fire and his own ritual circle, vow-like. Then he dumps his empty canister and leaps for the tree branch.

Marlene doesn't stop to see if he made it. She's already running for the trees again, trailing masses of petrol in her wake, a trail of it through the grass. She has barely made it back to her root, to the treeline, into the shade of it when she hears the men making their way back through the forest, talking in low voices.

She looks up; Regulus is spidering along the creaking branch, smearing blood and fuel in dark trails along the wood. He barely makes it to the part of the bough thick enough to stand on before the men step out of the trees.

Out in the open and exposed, he makes a daring jump, on his feet, for the tree trunk. One of his feet catches and for a moment, Marlene thinks he'll fall, but he wrangles a hand around a solidary knot on the trunk and uses it to swing himself down, down, from branch to branch until he is on the forest floor. He hits it running, sprinting silently off into the dark woods. Deserter. That's nothing new.

Marlene ducks her head low. The guards are halfway back to the house by now, but some part of the commotion seems to have reached them. One of them turns but the other doesn't stop. They seem to think it's a wasted effort.

"Thank Merlin," Marlene breathes. She doesn't have long now until they smell the petrol. Until they realise they've

been duped.

She drops the empty tank, not caring that it clatters. In one movement, she pulls the lighter from her long coat and flicks it open, pressing the flame to the edge of the pearly trail of fuel with shaking hands. She makes this a prayer; she makes this burning a warning.

Fire licks up in the grass. Marlene watches, hungry, as it scorches in a great hissing trail to the west side of the house, to the sunken pit of the cellar.

When the flame hits the side of the building, it rises roaring up the trail Regulus left it, up and up to the rafters. It's already catching in the foundations, fire rising in a great coffin-shaped mass from the ground, its unholy hands casting black ash across the stone.

Marlene stands up. She can't stop watching it. She puts the lighter back into her pocket and brushes her teeth against her lip, trying to find something to bite. She stares as flame lurches in a great, wide arc around the outside.

The guards start shouting. One of them raises their wand. *No*, some unwell part of her says, *no, let it burn, let it keep on dying*.

A hand on her arm. Regulus is there, stinking of blood and soil. "You would have left me to die," he says.

"Of course I would," Marlene responds. She pulls out her knife. "Help me?"

Regulus stares from her to the blade. He pulls out his own and clinks it against hers, as if to say, *cheers*. Marlene thinks he might kill her in that split-second, might plunge

the knife deep into her guts, but he just turns and heads out of the trees. She follows him.

The house burns for hours. They leave the guards on the grass, both of them unconscious. The fire might spread to them, Marlene doesn't know. As intimately as she knows fire, she is not of a technical mind, not this afternoon, anyway.

She and Regulus sit like birds in a tree on the east side. Regulus rolls his trousers up and Marlene daps antiseptic into the wounds without much care for being gentle. They breathe in the thick woodsmoke. They do not speak. If the prisoners in the basement are screaming, it isn't audible. All they can hear is the crackling of the fire, the thunder-crack pounding and snapping of the foundations of the house crumbling to pieces.

"They really hurt," Regulus tells her as the sky goes dark. "I think I felt them scrape bone."

"No you didn't," Marlene dismisses, even though she can see glints of white poke through the gouged flesh in bright, small pockmarks. "You're fine."

He leans sideways against her. It isn't affection; he's probably afraid he'll fall otherwise. "Hurts," he repeats, more insistent.

"Oh, shut up."

"One of these days, you'll get hurt on one."

Marlene shows him the jagged scar through the edge of her lips. "First job," she explains.

“You got caught?”

She tripped and fell on a rock as she was running away. “I got into a knife fight with a French mob boss on the way out.”

“Far less valiant than me,” Regulus says, “we can agree on that.”

“Sure,” Marlene agrees. Regulus’ cheek is cold against her shoulder. She would like to shove it off but she doesn’t. “Either way, there’s nothing broken.”

“A miracle.”

“It’s a miracle that they didn’t catch you.”

Regulus squints down through the trees at the guards lying in the grass. Knocked out with the butt of Marlene’s knife, bleeding a bit but not enough that it’ll kill them. “I’ve never killed someone before.”

“Before now,” Marlene corrects.

“I only did the roof.”

“Are we working from technicalities?”

“I would rather that,” he admits, sounding exhausted. Bone-deep tired. Like he would like to sleep and not wake up.

“Okay,” Marlene agrees, rather than pick this fight. She will pick and pick and pick another day. “We should go soon. They’ll come back soon, the other death eaters. A miracle they weren’t in the house.”

“Sunday,” Regulus says knowingly.

It isn't a comforting thought. "Poaching, you called it."

"The Blacks never did it. We're not particularly active people. Some families do it like muggle families hunt foxes."

"Did Sirius know that?"

Regulus goes dead still against her. "Yeah," he murmurs eventually. "The fire in Newhaven, it was started by a Pureblood."

"Oh?"

He nods. "It's a Pureblood heritage spell. They used to use it to burn traitors."

"Pleasant."

"Always thought he would die by fiendfyre someday," Regulus mutters. "Trial by fire. I've imagined he'd go out like that since he was a child."

"Do you think it was him that started it?"

He shrugs against her shoulder. "I can't figure it out in my head. The why. So I can't know the who yet. But... there's something about it..." He trails off.

"Well," Marlene says. "I don't care what your brother is doing, no offence. I really don't give a shit. So we should probably get out of here."

"I don't give a shit either," Regulus protests, sitting up straight and shuffling away from her.

Marlene ignores him. She shuffles her hands onto the branch beneath her and slips off, dangling for a moment

before dropping to the ground.

“Come on,” she calls up to him. “I’ll catch you. Bridal-style.”

“Shut it,” Regulus groans, dropping down after her. His knees buckle. Marlene doesn’t step forward to help him get to his feet again, just watches him struggle until he reaches them.

They trek west, in a great arc around the burning building, which pours a great pillar of smoke into the sky, tall and wide as the hand of god. Marlene leads this time, as she usually does. Regulus hobbles along after her, not seeming to know which leg to limp on. The thick, greenish smell of the forest weighs in around them. They fall over rocks, not coordinated enough to avoid them.

It hits Marlene when they are half a mile from the house that they have murdered people. That it isn’t hypothetical anymore.

She doesn’t stop walking, though she thinks it would help her. She doesn’t rest a flat-palmed hand to a tree to hold herself up. The leaves feel like eyes, watching her, blinking in the wet light. Behind her, Regulus doesn’t stop moving either, nor does his breathing stutter. His brittle uneven stride doesn’t break. The great, unspoken reality of this rots between them like some strange dead thing.

If only Dorcas could see her now, Marlene thinks. If only Mary could. Her mother, maybe dead now. Her uncles, worrying about her back home. Would any of them ever be able to look at her again? The doubt swelters in.

Behind her, Regulus coughs. She doesn’t turn to look at him.

“Are you okay?” he asks exactly once.

Marlene nods. “Are you okay?”

She doesn’t hear him answer, and fills a nod into that stretch of silence.

They continue their silent funeral march. Marlene pulls her lighter out and flicks it open and shut, open and shut. Open and shut. She watches the fire strain against the quiet air, flickering with no wind. The only sound in the whole forest is its very faint, very small roar. Behind her, Regulus picks holes into his hands.

Marlene is so engrossed by the flame that she doesn’t look where she’s going; she trips and falls, then, over something large on the ground, and stumbles.

“Fuck,” she snaps, finding her feet. She flicks the lighter closed and turns around, and against her will, a scream tears out of her.

There’s a body on the ground, so black with soot it looks charred to the bone. Unmoving, sprawled still in the dust.

Regulus stares with big eyes at it. “They... must have escaped.”

Marlene collapses to her knees beside it. She feels scattered into small bits. She puts her hands on its shoulders and then its back, and then feels its face. It’s still warm. She puts a hand in front of its nose.

“It’s still breathing,” she whispers. Then she shouts it. “It’s still breathing!”

"He's still breathing," Regulus says, kneeling down on the other side of the body. He uses the sleeve of his jacket to push soot out of its face. "Not burnt badly, either. Must have gotten out when the fire ate through the cellar roof."

Marlene sits back on her haunches. She pushes her face into her hands and breathes in and out, in and out. "Oh fuck."

Regulus rolls the body onto its back. "A prisoner..." he murmurs.

"He's properly alive?"

"Yeah," Regulus promises. "Just passed out."

"Jesus. Jesus Christ. Christ alive. Fucking hell."

Regulus stares at the man for a long time. "I know him," he murmurs, looking up. "Mundungus Fletcher. He was a seventh year when I was in third or fourth. Slytherin."

Marlene blinks at him. Her brow feels pulled so tight it may force tears from her; she can feel them burning behind her eyes. "What?"

"He's a thief," Regulus says. "When he left Hogwarts, he got on the Death Eaters' radar for... petty theft, mostly. Minor stuff."

"Oh," Marlene says, unsure of what he wants her to say. *He almost died. Not to mention the ones who did. The ones he left behind in there.*

Regulus shakes his head slowly. "It doesn't make any sense. If he was only a thief, they would've just killed him. Why drag him out here? Why...?" He trails off, frowning.

“We fucking killed people,” Marlene spits.

“I’m trying not to think about it!”

“Me too!”

“Then don’t say it!” Regulus shouts.

Marlene grabs him by the lapels of his coat and shakes him until his teeth clack together. Regulus grabs her by the throat, holding it in both hands, throttling her. She topples forward over Mundungus Fletcher’s body and hurtles, screaming, at Regulus; she grabs him by the hair and slams his face into a rock hard enough to make him bleed, to break his skin. He twists under her and pounds his knee up into her stomach over and over until Marlene is retching.

They tear at each other’s hair and clothes and faces until they are both bloody messes. The cuts on Regulus’ hands all rip open, dripping ichor. Marlene bites his arm so hard that rusty wetness bursts into her mouth, a torrent of it, too thin and liquid. It fills her throat like water and she swallows it.

Regulus tears her face from his arm and throws Marlene against a tree, and she kicks out at him over and over. She catches his face and his clavicle and the knobbly bit of his shoulder. He snaggles both hands into the lip of her boot and pulls it right off her foot and Marlene shoves her socked foot against the flat front of his throat and presses him into the mud.

He makes a choking sound, eyes huge as he stares up at her. Marlene stares back. They watch each other, breathing hard. Regulus on the floor and Marlene over him, she thinks-- she thinks-- she thinks it begins and ends here. Foot on his throat, an inch from crushing it.

Marlene shuffles away. Regulus heaves in a great gasp and scrambles backwards. Their backs find opposite tree trunks. They both leave their knives in their pockets. Nobody else will die tonight.

“We should take him,” Regulus croaks, rubbing his throat. It’ll bruise. “We can hold him ransom.”

“What the fuck could we possibly have to gain from that?!” Marlene snaps.

“We can try to get some money off him. From the Order, if he’s with them.”

“The Order’s trying to kill me!”

“You’re not important enough for them to try to kill you!”

Marlene hesitates. “We can’t exactly drag him five miles to the train station.”

“We could steal a car. Once we get there. Tie him up and put him in the boot.”

“You’re fucking insane. Don’t you rich people have house elves?”

“One. I freed him.” Regulus laughs in the back of his throat. “He used to bring me food and bandages at Durmstrang so I wouldn’t *die*.”

“I didn’t fucking ask. I don’t care. I couldn’t care less.” Marlene runs a hand back through her hair. “I should kill you.”

Regulus shrugs a shoulder jerkily. “I’m thinking pragmatically. That’s usually you.”

Marlene shakes herself. "Don't try it."

"Sorry."

She stands up, padding half-barefooted to Fletcher's unconscious body. He looks dead to the world, eyes closed. Probably collapsed from malnutrition, just by the look of him, drawn and rattish.

"You'll be the death of us one of these days," Marlene says over her shoulder.

"That's a yes," Regulus replies. He gets to his feet and limps over to her, putting the boot back into her hand.

Marlene leans over to put it on. Regulus punts his elbow into the small of her back to knock her to the ground and she takes him down with her; soil fills her mouth, closely followed by blood as he kicks her in the teeth, and they're fighting again.

Chapter End Notes

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INTERLUDE

Chapter Notes

bit of a different one! necessary, though. really pulls part two together i think.

no major warnings in this one! some fucked up relationship dynamics and mild suicidal ideation.

enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Jones,

I hit Slovenia yesterday. And yes, before you ask in that rhetorical way, I'm still alive.

It's peaceful out here, peaceful in the way a dead body is peaceful. I'm always waiting for something to come out and get me. Stupid, I know. I'm a stupid person generally, is what you would say if you were here, which of course, you aren't.

I don't know when this'll get to you, so for reference, I'm writing on the fifteenth of September. 1977. If that needed clarification. Maybe it did. Just to remind you that you're getting older every year. Anyway, it's mid September, so being in Slovenia already is making me optimistic when considering how long it'll take for me to reach the Kórház. Hey, I might be back with you soon enough. I don't think you care much, but I'm telling you as a threat, not a reassurance, don't fear; I'm under no particular illusion that you miss me much.

How are things in Merthyr? Good enough, I hope. Calm. Since our run-in with the dementors I've been thinking about what you told me. That one of the pack was Kissed last year. Who were they? What had they done? What happened afterwards? Nobody ever explained to me what happens when someone is kissed by a dementor. I always wondered, because I figured somehow that would be the way that I went. You know. Werewolf in the magical world and all that.

Have the power cuts been too bad? I think all the time of June. Those three weeks. I know it was awful but a part of it was... raw. Made me feel like a person again, worrying about the coal dust in the water supply and the radiators that wouldn't turn on. Having to take a bath in the pot after five others and it was cold by then anyway. I felt less like a wizard and more like a person. I miss it sometimes, worrying about all that shit as opposed to... this. Dark lords, wildfires. The great heavy reality of what I'm out here looking for.

I know you told me Efa was sending me on a doomed mission. And I believed you. But you'd think she would at least try to convince me this was worth something. She's being heavyhanded with this shit. She wants me to KNOW that I'm going nowhere. I don't know how to feel about that. I don't know how to feel about her. I know you adore her, Jones, but she can be... a piece of work.

It's beautiful where I am. It'll be the next moon soon. I'm going to go get chains tomorrow, from a hardware store somewhere. Tie myself up in the forest and hope it keeps the wolf down. Being without the pack will make him go a bit bezerk I think. You told me once I should call the wolf 'him' instead of 'it'. I've been trying to bear that in mind.

You sounded like James as you said it. You scare me sometimes but you didn't then.

Anyway. I don't know why I'm still going on. I was considering sending you a postcard so I'd have to limit my wordcount, but I couldn't find a tourist place that sold them. I'm already running out of money, but you knew that, didn't you? And you know I'll survive anyway. Built the same, we are.

I should get back to my pointless mission. Every pursuit I've made in the past few months, few years, forever, it has felt like this. Maybe that's what Efa wanted. So I'll ask you this: do you think she's really that cruel?

Cheers,

Lupin.

Auror Moody,

We have yet to receive a response to our last letter, so I've made the (risky) decision to send word again. If our messages are being intercepted, we need to know as soon as possible. We can't afford to make mistakes right now.

We've got a store of stolen dragonhide ready to send down whenever you're ready. We've all got the Trace; it'll have to go the muggle way. But we need your address. It's been radio silence for weeks from you. Forgive me for sounding unprofessional, Alastor, but what sort of operation are you running? No witch or wizard I've spoken with in the past two months has heard a word out of London. No letters back. Are ours even reaching you?

Respond as soon as possible, or we'll have to sell on to an unlicensed buyer overseas. We have chosen our side in this war, and it's with you. That puts all of us in danger. Do not make us regret it, Moody.

Yours faithfully,

Glen Conebush, Scottish Magical Trade Commission.

Sirius (Surname Redacted),

I don't know why I'm writing to you. I think I've been influenced into this. I'm going to throw away this letter: when you find it in the rubbish, reader, know that I'm going to try to steal the last of your change out of your jacket tonight. It'll be gone by the time you read this. Don't try to get it back off me, Marlene, or I'll knock your teeth out.

Anyway, back to you. The Sirius in my head. The Sirius in my head is a corpse, hanging bloody-mouthed from a noose somewhere. That is, perhaps, a bit morbid, but I told myself I would be honest here, so that's what I'm doing. You are a corpse in my mind and I think I'm writing to you to make things simpler for myself. To figure out how I feel.

First of all: I think you're a coward. I want you to know that. Wherever you ran to after you got out of Rosier Manor, you've been a ghost for a year now, and I think that makes you a coward and it makes you a dead thing, and you deserve nothing from anybody but contempt. I say this with the full awareness that I've done the same thing, but I raise you this: I have never pretended to be brave. I have never pretended to be kind. I have never pretended to be anything other than living on stolen time and I think you have committed murder in a way by killing the real rotten

terrible self inside of you and replacing it with a false person.

This is the second point I want to make, following on: Riddle is a coward too. He's expanding into France as we speak. He's killed a lot of French people that 'Direct Action' will not name. Their faces won't grace the deathlist. But the main man himself hasn't been seen. He's hiding like you are, somewhere out there in the howling winds. This storm the New War has created. I can't figure out why yet, but I'm thinking on it. But I could never get inside his head like you, could I? I never understood him like you did. You were always far more like him than I was. The ultimate irony. There it sits between us, the Absurd. I won't speak with anybody else's mouth: I am not like you.

That being said, here is the third point I'm making: I'm a coward, too. I won't write where I am, even though you'll never read this. Just in case through the miles of space and time between us some shred of it reaches you. But I'm holing myself away in some poor dirty hovel in Central Europe, there is the smell of gasoline on my hands. I am burning the things you left behind. Have you noticed me yet? I ask myself a lot. Have you noticed me yet? Have you noticed yet? Have you?

There's this great brewing brimming awful hungry violence in me these days. I had it before but now it sits right on the surface. I spend half the time fighting Marlene and the other half of the time picking holes in myself, I have grown my nails out to do it right. That's what Durmstrang did. I am bleeding on the paper, I hope you hate that. I hope it makes you hate yourself. When I see you again I think I might, just a little, perhaps more than a little, try to kill you. A few times. Enough that the message of it sticks. We killed people the other day. I can do it again.

You left. You don't know how bad it was when you left. You never will. You don't know how bad things were. I feel like a raw ugly thing. More pain and anger and murder than person. And you can tell me over and over you stepped into his hands and stepped into his storm for me, and each time I will believe you less. I hope you choke on your words and I hope they kill you slowly.

I freed Kreacher. I told myself it was the right thing to do but you know why I really did it? I think he deserves all the misery you do. I think you deserve it more. He spent our childhoods watching us burn but you got out and didn't come back.

- Regulus Arcturus Black.

Lily,

This letter is mostly motivation for myself, so I apologise if it... rambles a bit. I'm sorry. But just bear with me and I'll try to get something worthwhile down on the page.

I've been a bit behind on letters recently. Not much! Only by a few days. Everything gets delivered in the end. Honestly I'm probably overreacting about nothing and chances are it's actually fine and I don't have any reason to be anxious but... well. Anyway. I'm writing this so it motivates me to get all the built-up mail sent off, so then I can send this to Rostock and you'll get it. I doubt you'll reply (I'm not Remus, am I? Sorry that was a horrible thing to say), but I'm going to send it anyway.

I hope you're doing alright after the raid on the train. It's been three weeks and I hope you know that I don't blame you anymore. That's a lie. I sort of blame you. You knew that, though. I don't blame you as much as I did that day

though, so we're probably on a downwards slope. By this trajectory I will have forgiven you in a couple of months. Which will probably be how long it takes for me to see you again.

It's getting so cold already. Autumn (it's almost October!) and the dementors have made it fucking unbearable out here. London is the coldest it's been ever, I think the muggles said on the radio. It's making a bunch of them panic. Little do they know. It's minus ten and minus fifteen most nights, and it's going to get worse. Dorcas and I sleep on the same mattress now just for the body heat. She says I kick in my sleep. She's probably right but I'll keep denying it.

We're losing more of London each day. That's the worst bit. We keep losing chunks of it, streets. Soon we'll have lost all of the inner city. We've managed to keep the muggles (in an official capacity) unaware. On paper it's unsafe gas pipes. Made half the city unlivable, everyone's been moved out and kept out for their own safety. There are already conspiracy theories flying around though, and the death eaters are all too happy for the muggles to know about them, and to be scared of them, so that's that, I suppose. We're fighting a losing battle here. We need time and weapons and... and letters. But I'm getting on that! It's all going to be alright in the end. I promise you.

I would write to Remus but I don't know his address anymore. I saw it on the letter he sent to the Order a few months ago but at the time I was so angry at him that I didn't note it down. I wish I would've now. He mentioned he'll be travelling out of the country soon (something for the werewolves), but I could probably send him a few letters for his own peace of mind and have them all be there waiting when he gets back to Wales, right?

I can't stop thinking about him. Him and you. You and him. I thought I'd pressed it down deep enough in me to get it off my mind but seeing you at the raid on the train lifted it all up like fucking gunk and grime. It's hanging around in my gut like weird cultures. Him and you. You and him. Sirius too, but Sirius never left. It's been a while since I wrote to him. Not since Little Hangleton.

I told you I would ramble, didn't I? And I was right. This is rambly as anything. I'll cut it off here by telling you this: I'm fine. I'm great, actually. Despite my increasingly wanted status, I haven't gotten properly hurt yet, and my chest is doing great! I'm optimistic about the war, even though things are a bit shit now; nobody's seen the big man for months, that's a good sign, right? It means people will lose faith in him. It means we're getting closer to winning. This is how we win.

Stay safe in Rostock. Bring me back a pretzel next time, or whatever it is the Germans eat.

Yours,

James.

Professor McGonagall,

This is a follow-up to my last letter. I wanted to ask whether you'd received it? I understand that communication is tenuous these days, so in case you didn't, here's the message again:

I've recently taken a handful of escaped students under my wing. They climbed out of their dorm room windows and ran into the forest. I live near Hogsmeade and they're staying with me now; they're safe, don't worry! Fourth-year

'Hufflepuffs' (I never attended Hogwarts, so I assume that's how it's spelled?), four of them. Purebloods scared of being stuck in the castle as the war gets worse. I don't blame them. They're terrified.

If it's convenient, I can keep them here for as long as is necessary. I understand that you're busy. But I wanted to make sure you're aware that they're with me. Their faces have been in the Prophet; their parents must know that they're missing, and I'd imagine they're terrified. I would appreciate some sort of response, even if it's short. Maybe I'm fretting, and if anybody knows how deadly the death eaters can be, it's me, and I want to do everything I can to protect these kids from him. But not at the expense of their parents.

Please write back as soon as possible.

Sincerely,

Miss. Verda Pertinger.

Dorcas,

Another day, another letter that I will not be sending. It's strange to make the decision beforehand. This feels voyeuristic, like an exhibition. Regulus, stop reading, I write, despite knowing he won't. Regulus, I'll take your shoulder out of its socket again, I write, and he knows I'll keep to my word, but he won't quit. We are all tangled up in each other's heads recently. It makes me feel like something that is not myself.

The password for last week's 'Direct Action'. Did you see it? Me. My name. 'Marlene'. Crazy, that. Do they think I'm missing by mistake? Do they not know I missing'ed myself?

Has James not told them? Knowing James he's far too busy delivering people's mail and making Remus Lupin cry to tell them anything. But it's funny to be treated like a missing person. It makes me feel quite mysterious indeed. Like I faked my own death. Me and Reggie.

'Reggie'. He'll hate that. You hated when I called you 'Dorky', told me you thought it was ridiculous. But you'd smile when you thought I wasn't paying attention, wouldn't you? You couldn't hide it from me. I could see right through you. I'd like to call you that again someday but something tells me when we see each other again, it'll be less than amicable.

There's a letter I will be sending soon, though. I won't be signing my name on it but perhaps you will see it and perhaps you will recognise my tone and know in an implicit mystical way that it was I who wrote it. I like to think we were that eternal. I like to think that you only think of me now. Mary, too, but in a more abstract way. Or maybe not. Maybe to you, I am more a dead person than she is. That's a funny thought. I don't like it. I imagine us as doomed lovers. Something poetic. Don't tell me I'm delusional: I know I am.

We kidnapped a guy the other day. Not quite kidnapped. Transferred him from the death eaters' custody into ours. Crazy, right? Crazy. He's in the boot of the car we stole. Neither of us can drive. We take shifts. We've almost crashed four times. Between you and I and him, he's the worse of the two of us.

Think of me. And I'm sorry, if hearing it helps. I don't know that it does.

- Marlene.

Padfoot's Army/James Potter,

You got Dorcas Meadows out, so I know you're my only hope. I need help.

My name is Elias Kirwin. I hope you remember me? I was a part of the original PA. We were friends, I think. I'm a Ravenclaw. I know you get a lot of letters and everyone knows you must be getting overwhelmed, since you don't respond to stuff much since the new year started (or at all, I think?) but I need to get out of here. I wouldn't be reaching out if I had any other option.

We got a new DADA professor this year. Professor Hickories. He's... well, he's the odd sort. Not as intimidating as the last one. Mean but in a quiet sort of way. And he knows that I'm a halfblood; he took me aside after our first class and told me. Straight to my face. Like he was reprimanding me. He knew my dad, knew he married a muggle. He knows.

I've been getting myself by as a pureblood until now, like all the other halfbloods here. He's going to tell the other teachers soon, though. As soon as I'm not of any use to him anymore. For the time being I'm... surviving. I've managed to keep him from spilling yet. Don't ask me how; I can't say it. He's not a nice man. I've kept him quiet for now. But it won't last for long. They'll kill me, or do what they did to Dorcas Meadows and make an example of me. I'm not brave like she was. It'll destroy me, torture curses in front of the school in the great hall, cutting me out of classes. They'll go after dad. I can't warn him; I tried writing him a letter but he never replied. I guess they intercepted it somehow. I don't know.

Help me. Please.

Your friend, hopefully, Elias.

Ms. Agata Wehner,

I hope you and the sanctuary are well. Be aware: my English is not good, so this is being written by a friend. Misquotations should not be attributed to me. That being said, neither should honest inaccuracies. I'm not in this for anything other than the money.

To answer your primary question directly, yes, I know of the curse. I treated a girl with it earlier this year, late July. It was the first time I'd come across it. I am unaware of her current condition. If she's dead or recovered, I haven't been told. I'm left to assume she is neither.

This treatment dug quite severely into my stores. The potion I used to combat the spreading of the infection required, among other things, ground Hodag horn, Porlock hoof and bursting mushroom. All are rare in the best of times, but especially now. Even this potion did not do much more than slow the infection. I am uncertain of how it might be stopped entirely, but I have some ideas.

It's concerning to hear of the curse's more frequent use. From my understanding, you believe it to be a recent invention? I don't advocate for the use of terms that denote wars as 'old' and 'new' -- it is all the same one -- but as I understand it, this curse has only been in documented use since the spring, has it not? A New War pestilence indeed.

If paid a suitable commission for my work, I could begin research into a permanent cure. It'll be expensive, though, particularly to get the ingredients. My skills are one of a

kind and my time is valuable. Write back to me if and when you have come to a decision as to whether they'll be useful, and enclose your offer. If you're unwilling or unable to pay, do not bother.

All my well-wishes go to the sanctuary. I think what you are doing is admirable. I was in the business of self-sacrifice once but right now is a bad time for me. So I'll remind you: contact me if you can pay.

Sincerely,

Mx. Claude Archeambeau (they/them (ENG), ul/lu (FRE), xier/xien (GER), hen (NOR), hán/háns/háni (ICL), etc.)

Jones,

I have entered Hungary! It's miserable as sin. Cold and grey and very damp. I keep getting that dementorish feeling, even though I haven't seen any yet. Can't tell if the voice in the back of my head is a bad memory or my imagination. They become more the same thing each day.

That was morbid! You're laughing at me, I can hear it from here. Laughing at my melodramatics. I'll quit it, for now, but let the threat of it hang over your head: at any moment I can whip out some great sad line and press it on you. Always be on the lookout.

Your letter confused me a bit. Things have been fine? Without me? It doesn't make any sense. Here I was thinking things must be awful over there, because I was so integral to the pack. Almost a month without me now, and things haven't changed? I thought I was important. Guess not. You can fix fences on your own next time, then.

In all seriousness: I'm glad things are okay. I get the sense that things aren't often just... alright. That you're in a sort of peril more than you're not. But it's good to know you're surviving, all of you. Efa, too. You spent a great deal of time talking her up to me in the last letter you sent. You know telling me all her good traits won't make me see her any differently, don't you? But I'll admit maybe I was a bit harsh. I know why she's doing this and she knows that I know. So we're at an impasse. On a level. Mutually assured destruction or something of the like.

I'll be at the hospice sometime soon. It'll take some time for me to find it, since it's so magically obscured. After the next moon, maybe. This last one was... bad. Reminded me of being a kid again. I almost broke both of my wrists. Small blessings that I didn't, right? The chains worked alright. I'll have to use them again.

October is cold. Is it cold back home too? Are you staying warm? What a weird thing to say.

Cheers,

Lupin.

Padfoot's Army/James Potter,

Did you get my letter?

Elias Kirwin.

James,

~~*I haven't heard from you since the raid! How are y*~~

~~Things are getting worse in Rostock. People keep coming in with that strange curse nobody will tell me anything about. Not being able to speak German is a curse. I wonder if it's the same curse that got Mary. I wonder~~

~~I think of Peter a lot. I really am sor~~

~~I haven't written to Remus since we all saw each other. Partially because he's on the move and I don't know an address, and partially because I know it upset you to hear that we'd been sending letters to each other and not to you. This is a sort of olive br~~

~~I remember back home in Kettering before I came to Wales to stay with the both of you, I thought I would be fine living the rest of my life angry with you. But I can't, I just can't. Please write b~~

~~I can't do this~~

Auror Moody,

Our dragonhide has been sold on to a secondary buyer. We understand that at times like this, trade isn't your highest priority, but we would ask that next time, you refrain from leaving us in the lurch like that, especially after impressing on us how important it was that we sold to you.

Yours faithfully,

Glen Conebush, Scottish Magical Trade Commission.

Marlene,

Look at me, writing letters I can't send. I'm turning into James.

I think James is one of those people it's hard not to turn into once you've been around him for a while. He's electric in that ball-lightning way, little bits of him jumping off and into other people. He gives me static electric shocks whenever we share the mattress. His chest has been getting worse and he groans in his sleep and it's very irritating, I wish I cared less.

It's odd, being all that the other has. Us two. Left behind, the last of our strange little knots of love. Him and I are the same in a lot of ways but I think we're most the same when we're losing. And we're almost always losing.

I'm talking about him to keep from having to talk about you, if that wasn't obvious already. I'm okay with talking about him (he's easy to discuss: he's a mess, so am I, but not enough that I feel like a hypocrite for saying he is, he makes it easy to pretend I'm fine). It's far harder to wrap my head around you.

This is what this is: this is me writing it down so I don't have to say it when I see you again. If I see you again. Big if. All of the things that I can't say out loud. I am writing you a sort of obituary, for her, for me. For all the things that've died since Hangleton. Before Hangleton, really. When you left in January. Stepped onto that boat and never came back. Mary used to have nightmares about it.

I guess I'll start with this. A part of me still remembers the way you looked that morning in third year when you took me to the owlery and sat me down in the hay and asked if you could date me, please. All polite. I'd never dated anyone and I hadn't been sure until that point that I wanted

to. I had assumed I was like Lily, who told me once that she was sure she wasn't able to fall in love with people, that she didn't have the capacity.

But I said yes, I guess because it was what I wanted. Oh, I can't lie to you; that was always you. It WAS what I wanted. It was what I wanted then and that didn't change. Mary came along because she always did. We didn't even need to tell her. I kissed you and you kissed her with bits of me still lingering on your lips. And that was all we needed to do or say.

But it started with you and I.

I'm saying this because I feel like I need to: I despise you. Not all of me does, but it's a big enough bit of me that it's eating me up. You told me once that you think a part of any relationship is hating each other just enough that you don't leave. I didn't believe you then and I don't think I believe you now. You were the one who left. Was it because you hated her? Because you hated me? Was it always hatred, down to its core? Was everything hatred with you?

I don't know how to talk to you anymore. I want to understand you. I want to pick apart your brain and look inside; I want to know why. It feels like it's been years since I knew why you do anything. I understood Mary just fine but I never understood you. You don't feel like a person anymore. You feel like prey to a predator. Salt in that wound she left behind the night she died. This elusive thing I'm chasing, smoke between my fingers.

Maybe you're dead already. I don't know. There's been no trace of you. I wouldn't be surprised if you were in Australia by now, living it up someplace nobody knows you. Perhaps back where your dad's from. Perhaps you really

are gone, burnt out into a husk in a ditch somewhere where people won't find you until you're unidentifiable and maggoty. And I don't know how to feel about it. I don't know whether I'm sad. I don't know whether I'm scared. I don't know whether I'm happy.

You left, is what I'm saying. You left. I can't put it in fancier fucking words. You would like me to. You want poetics and shit and I'm just not doing that. You left and now I'm alone with the ghost of her hanging around me and not leaving, and you're some faroff place where 'Direct Action' can't report on you, you're scattered to the wind somewhere and I doubt you'll ever come back for anything. Least of all for me.

And I'm so angry. I'm so angry with you. I'd like to grab you and shake you. I'd like you to die, I think it would make me happy as much as it would make me sad, I think I'd get closure and move on and go to therapy or something. At least it'd be a clean break. You and your grand assumptions, you and your fucking temper. I wish you weren't the only thing I think about. I think about you and your deadness and your laugh and the blood in your teeth and your face in the owlery more than I think about our dead girlfriend and I hate you for doing this to me I hate you I hate you I hate you. I hate you. I want to kiss you. I hate you.

This was meant to be a breakup note but I can't say it. I'd rather find out you died somewhere, alone and mangled somewhere, somewhere, somewhere, like her. I'd rather that than have to end things with you. I could read a speech at your funeral more easily than I could tell you I don't love you. Because I did and I do and I'm scared I always will.

Mary used to say you would come back. But she doesn't — DIDN'T, she's dead, were you aware? I'm making you aware — know you like I do, Marlene. I know you're some ugly thing like a broken bottle or a raw wire and you're a coward, you're more scared of death than anybody I've ever met. You won't come back. You won't. And I'm scared I'll spend the rest of my life hoping for you. Wanting you. Unable to mourn you, because you won't be dead but you'll haunt me like you have since we were thirteen. You won't ever fully go away.

I don't know what this note is for now, but I'm going to keep it to give you, in case on some off chance I really do see you again. So you know where I stand. The truth is this: it would be easier for both of us if you died, and I wish you had the decency to. But if you came here tomorrow and knocked on my door and asked me to run away with you I would do it. I would do it. I wouldn't have to think about it.

God, it sucks being all that's left here. And you don't care; I know you don't care; wherever you are, whatever you're caring about right now, it isn't me. You heartless bitch, I miss you. I miss you like I've never missed anything before. I miss her too but I feel like I can survive with this great hole in my heart she left. But so long as you're still out there I'm going to stay half-dead.

Go fuck yourself, Marlene.

- Dorcas.

Esteemed Order of the Phoenix,

Since you haven't responded to our last letter, we assume you haven't any interest in repossessing Mundungus Fletcher? Did it reach you? We used that fun mailing

service you've got. Fletcher keeps telling us he isn't with you but we're not sure we believe him. This is your last chance to get back to us! Otherwise we'll probably dump him in the ocean or something. We're just being pragmatic here.

Once again, yours faithfully,

Some friends <3

Sirius (Surname Redacted),

Having so little food here is messing with my head. It reminds me of our childhood; remember it? Days without eating properly. The bones-deep ache of it that lasted as long as it felt pain could possibly last. Like a broken bone. It makes me anxious, makes me think I'm back in Durmstrang. I don't know why I'm telling you this. Probably just because I need to tell someone.

Is there a lot of food where you are? I expect not. You're probably withering away, especially now that it's getting colder. Mid-autumn. Doesn't feel like it should be that late in the year yet. I haven't told Marlene, but I think it's really killing me, this starvation thing. I almost passed out the other day, my head got all spinny. My fingernails are brittle and my stomach always hurts. I don't know how to ask for more. Nobody ever taught me. How do you do it? You're supposed to be the one to tell me stuff like that.

- Regulus Arcturus Black

Dorcas,

You know, I wish my travelling companion wouldn't write bullshit fake stories into his letters to his estranged brother about food scarcity and leave them out for me to find just to guilt me for not giving him more money to go out and spend on cigarettes or speed or whatever he buys. It would really ease up my stress levels if the little cunt would refrain from being so underhanded. In this confidential letter, only between you and I, I'll confide that I, too, had a bad childhood, and if he's a decent person he'll go get a job to fund my, I dunno, black tar heroin addiction. Or something like that. I can make up plenty of stories myself, you know.

Love you!

- Marlene.

Sirius (Surname Redacted),

If I was better at using my words, I would tell my travelling companion: it was worth a shot.

- Regulus Arcturus Black.

PS: Marlene, my nails are not brittle. Get too close and I'll take your eye out.

Padfoot's Army/James Potter,

HELP ME. PLEASE. PLEASE HELP ME.

I don't know if my letters keep getting lost or something: PLEASE. He keeps threatening to tell them. I can't keep this up. They'll go after my family, they'll hurt my parents. The Slytherins will murder me in my bed. Nobody will stop

them. You don't know how bad it is here. Is it so hard to get into the castle again? Since those Hufflepuffs made it out, not a single escape attempt has succeeded. There's no making it out of here. I need SOMETHING. PLEASE.

PLEASE MERLIN HELP ME

Elias Kirwin.

Auror Moody,

Are any of our letters reaching you? ARE ANYBODY'S letters reaching you? Are you even still there? You old fool, whatever's going on in London, we'd assumed at least some of the Order was still alive. Christ almighty. Without apparition and more of the floo network going down by the day, you might as well have disappeared off the face of the godforsaken planet.

I'm in contact with a few resistance groups around the country. People are getting antsy. The Order was the heart of our operations, but you've been dead silent for months. In Hogwarts students are dying. Out there in the rest of magical Britain, families are being MURDERED, Moody, and their names aren't making the deathlist. The Newhaven fire has started eating away at towns, killed that little muggle girl the other day. And you're all dead silent.

Get your bloody act together, all of you. My brother really set up a shambles, didn't he?

Sincerely,

Aberforth Dumbledore.

Claude,

I know you don't open these, but I need to keep trying or I don't know what I'll do. This is coming to you by snail-mail. Just... just keep reading, please. I paid for stamps.

Sirius is sorry. He won't stop saying it. He seems to apologise more than he breathes these days. Kid's going to develop a complex about it; I suppose we can add it to the list, eh? But he's sorry. I want you to know that. Truly and honestly cut up about it. Guiltier than he was after Galina, even. Well. As guilty, at least. I miss him when the only thing haunting him was getting fucking groomed by that psychopath. Now he's haunted because he thinks he killed Galina and he thinks he permanently wounded you or whatever.

Galina's still hanging on, just so you know. I visit when I can, which isn't often. Without her on call or you for emergencies it's hard to juggle everything. I'm getting grey hairs! What a disaster. Almost as much of a disaster as the fact that the only person I have left in the world is on her deathbed, Sirius is going to get himself killed, and you. You. You. Ohhh you. You make me soooo angry.

I know you're waiting for me to come down there myself to talk to you. Don't think I don't know what this is about. I think I would if I wasn't scared of what'll come of it. Are you angry at me, too? Or just him? From what I can tell, I didn't do anything, but neither did he, did he? And you're still determined not to talk to him again, so maybe I'm in the same category. Guilt by association. I thought we'd matured since we were sixteen. Guess not. You've managed to convince him you're a traumatised shell of a person but I know better. You're waiting. Waiting for bloody repentance.

I know you'll come around on your own eventually. But I fear we're running out of time. I'm trying not to scare her but the girl is dying. Dying, truly dying. Worse by the day. I can't DO eventually, Claude, I can't wait for your great ballooning pride to go down so you come around on your own. There's two dying kids on my hands and you can save at least one of them. Sirius is going to kill himself one of these days, you should see his arm. It's tearing him apart at the seams. He needs you. And Mary's innocent in this, practically a civilian.

I know people are saying now that you only work for pay. On commission, whatever you call it. Since the cave. I know you're sulking or angry or something. I KNOW you. I know you like to think I don't but I know you better than I know anybody in the world, and I certainly know you better than anybody else does. And I know that as melodramatic and awful and cruel as you can be, you're sitting in Cannes right now worrying yourself sick about Sirius. Holding yourself back on principle, you are, you idiot. You awful terrible fool.

Get over yourself. Come back. He misses you, and I miss you too -- don't make me say it again, my pride is wounded! I really do, though.

And more importantly, the girl is going to DIE. A bit time sensitive, no?

Frustratedly yours,

Tsai Yí'ān.

Padfoot's Army,

This is my fourth letter. Please, I beg you, read this one. Ibrahim, Labros and Hakeem McKinnon, my brothers in law, are missing since a raid by the death eaters almost two months ago. I'm pleading with you here, I'll do anything. Tell the Order of the Phoenix. Tell the people who run 'Direct Action'. Tell someone. Anyone. My daughter has been missing for a year since she had to run when the death eaters came for her, and her uncles are gone now, too. It's only me left, and I'm not magical. If they come for me, I can't protect myself.

Please help me. I can't take this radio silence any longer.

- Roisin McKinnon.

Jones,

I think I'm close now. Almost November and I haven't found it yet. Guess that optimism was misplaced, wasn't it? But I'm almost there now.

I suppose this is the right time to ask it, but... why? I get that she wanted to send me on a doomed mission but this feels cruel. And against her philosophy. Efa's been fighting the Ministry for years on every attempt they make to find a cure, or a supressant. It's baked into her ideology that she thinks trying to make us human isn't mercy.

Why on earth would she send me to find this dying man, at some hospice for the terminally ill in some country I've never been, only for false hope? Only for the same false hope we all know how to avoid? It's a fake trail, a dead lead. Going nowhere. Obvious as anything ever is. You know it. I know it. She knows it.

Is it really only about my loyalty? Or is she trying to figure out what sort of werewolf I am? What she can offer me to get what she wants out of me? I think she thinks I'm useful. Good: I am useful. But this seems inordinate. All I do is walk and walk and drag these chains around and I'm tired and this is unnecessary. I could come home right now, lie and say I found him. She wouldn't believe me, but would she believe me if I was telling the truth? Will she believe me at all?

I'm half doing this for you, you know. I think because you represent what I might have been if I never left Wales. The sort of friends I would've made. God, that's a weird thing to say. Sorry. But it's true. I would've given up and gone back to the Order already if it wasn't for this horrible killing hope I've got that I can save my country and be the right kind of werewolf for the Order. The right kind of wizard for the pack. The right kind of soldier in this war. I want to be of use; I want to be worth something.

That being said, with all this killing hope inside of me, none of it is for the validity of this lead. Because I've been told it my whole life and so have you, Huw Jones. There is no cure. A goose chase by some crazy lady isn't going to change that. So why, why, why?

I want to turn back. But I suppose there's no point, is there? I have to be worthy of something. I'm just scared of what I'll find there. Scared most of all that I'll walk out with nothing. Because I know it. You know it too. I'll walk out with nothing.

And then what? Then what?

Cheers, I suppose,

Lupin.

James and Remus,

They said on 'Direct Action' this week that they haven't got any names for the deathlist. That's good news but... the way the lady said it... I'm worried. We're all worried. And for more reasons than one.

Are things okay out there? It's like half the wizarding world outside Hogwarts has died. We don't get letters from parents anymore. None of us do.

What's going on?

- Hestia Jones.

Dorcas Meadows, James Potter,

Can't write much. Wrists gone gammy.

Something's wrong in Britain. What's going on? What happened to 'Direct Action'? There's no news. Radio silence.

Did you get my first letter? Are you okay?

Yours,

Mary Macdonald.

Pads,

Hey Pads. Hey Pads. Hey Pads. Maybe if I keep writing it it'll get easier.

It's almost November. It was almost March the last time I wrote to you. My stupid birthday. The whole stupid affair of it. I don't know why I stopped for so long. I wrote to Remus over and over and threw them all away. Lily, too. But I couldn't bring myself to write to you.

I think it's because I can't stop seeing the look on your face. Every time I close my eyes. The whole picture of you, in front of me. Close but not close enough. Your hair was a mess around you, longer than I've ever seen it. You were looking at me and seeing only me. You were looking at me and it felt like the first time anybody had looked at me in months. You were looking at me and I knew you'd leave again and it was like this big knot of hope or something it just died inside of my stomach. My chest was on fire, I couldn't breathe. I would have hugged you again if I could. Know that I would have, even if it broke me in two.

Remus and Lily really did leave in the end. I wasn't lying about that, though I think you knew that. I'm not a good liar. I used to think Remus wasn't either but now I don't know. He stayed so quiet for so long and I worry that one of these days he'll explode under the pressure of it. Just go fucking apeshit and start breaking things. I wonder whether I'll be one of the things he breaks, or you? Both of us? All three of us?

I don't know what to say to you. I think when I wrote to you in the Old War I was telling the truth, in every single thing I said. But I don't feel like I know how to do that anymore. I keep wanting to lie. I keep almost-lying. I almost wrote that I haven't written to Remus or Lily; I almost wrote that my chest is healed up now; I almost wrote that it's a relief to be writing to you like this. That it helps. But it doesn't. I feel worse.

I've never felt like this before, Pads. It's this horrible, pressing ache. It sits in the middle of my chest and I wake up and I just wish I hadn't. Every morning I just want to go back to sleep. Dorcas is fed up with me. I'm a waste of space and she knows it and I know it. I'm not delusional, no matter how much of a comfort it would be; I know when I'm fucking things up.

We started that fire, by the way. The Newhaven fire. Me and her. I don't know why I'm telling you that. Perhaps because we can't tell anyone else. It's spreading further and further and people are starting to die because of it. Pollution in the sky. There's always ash there now, raining down. It's getting too close to London. Fuck, Padfoot. We started it — I started it — for you. To get rid of that ring. Because I knew I had to; I knew you would want to kill it. I thought I knew. But now I don't know that I was right. I don't know that anything I've ever thought has been right. I spend every single day doubting myself and I don't do much of anything else. Is this how Remus feels? Wondering if he'll ever be worth enough for someone to love him more than they love someone else? I hate him, I want to shake him. I want to ask. I want to see him. I'm burning up with this thick, awful loneliness, it's killing me, it's going to kill me. I want a hug.

I told Lily the other day, in a letter I haven't sent yet, that I've got a good feeling about this war. But here's the truth, because you deserve it, because you're the only one that I can say this to: I'm terrified. The tide is too strong against us, and the death eaters are winning. They've practically won. Soon they'll have all of London and then what? How far will they go? We'll die, all of us. Me and Dorcas and Lily and Remus. And you, though you might as well already be dead. That was an awful thing to say, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean it. I'm sorry. Please don't stop reading.

I don't know how much longer I can stand this. This waiting. Waiting to die, waiting to lose. Waiting for the deathlist to read out the names of each of my friends. Every morning I wake up and tell myself today will be the day I get the letters sorted but every time I look at them I feel so sick I can't breathe, it sits in my throat. It makes me want to throw up. I can't stop looking at them and thinking of the apartment in Lambeth. I want to go back. I want to go back. If I'd said the right thing, threatened to off myself or something, we would've all stayed together. And things would be okay.

The Order is getting suspicious about the lack of communications. I keep lying myself into a deeper and deeper hole. Saying people have stopped responding. Saying letters are being intercepted. Saying thing after thing that isn't true; my stories are full of contradictions, soon they're going to catch on. I'm running out of time.

But I just can't fix it. It's too big. This huge mess I've made, I can't fix it, I can't solve it. I should run. I should run and catch a train and hurl myself into the Newhaven fire. I should go to Wales and sit at Remus' door and wait for him to come back. I should go... somewhere. I don't know where. I can't think of anywhere. Godric's Hollow? To the parents I buried myself? Somewhere. Somewhere. I don't know. Fuck. I don't know. Fuck.

I wish you were here. Remus said he's seen you cry but I never did. You were this great Iron Curtain and you never knew what to say when I was upset but you were always there. Cracking some stupid joke. Remember in third year I lost that quidditch match for us? Made a big cock-up of the whole season, and the team didn't speak to me for weeks. And you stuck right to my side like glue (even more than usual), and you never left me alone. I miss that you. Shorter

hair and less mad eyes. You looked more like a person then and it didn't make me love you more but... but...

I wish you were here, is what I'm saying. I think writing this is helping (I think: don't take my word for it, I'm as unreliable a narrator as they come). I don't know for sure. But it sort of feels nice to feel like your presence is close to me again. Do you write to me too? With that weird fucked up hand you've got now? Do you? Do you? Do you?

It feels like stepping into a grave. That's the right way to put it. Stepping into a grave. Comforting and consuming. Like an ending. I love Remus, in that I'm in love with Remus. I think we'd get married someday if it wasn't for all of this. He's... domestic. Kissing him is like cooking dinner. Like taking a train. But you're something different. You make me feel like I'm thirteen again, riding the high of my own genius. You make me feel like a little kid. Like both of us are little kids together. Like I'm giving you some good childhood you didn't get. Like we're cooking up some great scheme just by existing together, like we'll outsmart each and every one of them.

I'm glad we're here now. Even if you aren't really. I think acknowledging that you're alive is important to me. Like remembering why I'm still alive. Writing to you makes me feel like I am coming back to you and coming back to you and coming back to you.

I love you. (There. I wrote it right at the end like I used to. I don't know why I stopped.)

Yours,

Prongs.

PS: I think I fucked up the war. Just a bit.

Chapter End Notes

- [Official Tumblr](#)
- [Twitter Quotes Bot](#) (admin: [lupinlesbian](#))
- [Pinterest Board](#) (admin: [plantfeline](#))
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BAD MAGIC

Chapter Notes

oof this one took a while first i had a depressive episode then i had a chronic illness flareup and then we had a storm so bad it knocked out the power and also blew off the neighbours' roof. they're fine tho. anyway point is god didnt want me to write this but i did it anyway

tw: gore, injury, suicidal ideation, blood, mental illness/trauma, violence, etc.

my lovely friend mad made a fantastic jpds pinterest board you can find [here](#)! also also, HUGE thanks to the folks at the achievement hunter ot3 podcast for giving this little fic a mention. you guys have no idea how many years i spent in a huge parasocial relationship with you sdkfjgfk this is awkward huh. anyway i love your work

anyway, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“You look awful,” Sirius greets as he steps into the living room.

Mary groans, her chest shuddering upwards; she feels her ribs rattle, chafing. She tries to breathe out and it stutters and jerks from her like a laugh. “Sirius.”

“Oh, fuck.” There’s the sound of him dropping his bag. He kneels down beside her in the dark, grey eyes large. His knees fumble on the carpet. “You look *worse*.”

A spasm like a hiccup; she feels all the muscles in her stomach seize up and then release, it swells a great liquid pain up through her lungs. Mary fumbles out a hand to grab Sirius' wrist and squeezes it very tightly.

"Hurts," she groans.

Sirius takes her hand in his left one. His right arm dangles beside him like a used noose; it is the darkest and most dead thing in the room, even more than her.

"I didn't think you'd get worse," he says, with terrible urgency. "I didn't think you would get worse."

"Where have you been?" Mary asks, instead of answering the not-question.

He blinks at her. "Hungary."

"If either of us should be in Hungary, it's me."

"Don't say that. The Kórház is a hospice. It's for people who are dying."

Mary furrows her brows at him. Another wave of pain hits her and she squeezes his fingers so tightly in her own that she feels the veined skin of the back of his hand break beneath her nails. Sirius flinches but doesn't pull his hand away. They stay like that for a handful of brittle seconds.

"And you think I'm not dying," she forces out. "Look at me."

Sirius exhales shakily. "Yí'ān said you'd get worse before you got better."

Nausea curls tight hands around her head and squeezes; it puts its fingers in Mary's mouth. "And I'm not getting

better," she mumbles around them, tasting saliva.

"He promised," Sirius says with desperation.

"He didn't know what he was dealing with." Mary grabs his jaw with one hand, just to feel some part of another person, the warmth of it. She hears her wrist click-click-click-click like a creaking door. Sirius' skin is pearly and cold and he doesn't feel human. "The curse, it's not old. It's only been around since the New War. He thought he could handle it but it's nothing like anything he's ever dealt with before. He can't."

"He told me the other day he's got faith you'll be fine."

Mary shakes her head once. "His potioneer won't come to help. I can't move."

"I'll get Claude," Sirius says in a rush. "I'll find them, I'll convince them to come back, I'll... I'll..." And it seems to set in, what a hopeless idea that is. "There has to be something."

"He wrote to them."

"And?"

Mary nods towards the table in the middle of the room. Sirius shuffles on his knees to it; there are two sheets of paper sitting there, bright in the dim light.

This is an automated response, the first letter reads, in messy, un-automated handwriting. Mx. Archeambeau is not taking freelance work at this time. Thank you for your patience. And the same line repeated in a variety of languages underneath it, followed by an absurdly long list of pronouns.

Beside it, the second letter is a bit crumpled, like it was written and then screwed up and tossed against the wall. *OH, YOU ABSOLUTE CUNT, CLAUDE*, it reads. *YOU'RE THE WORST I HATE YOU.*

"They're not even answering Yí'ān?" Sirius asks breathlessly.

"Guess not," Mary says, and coughs so hard she feels like she's going to break open, pour guts out all over the carpet and the sofa. That would be a great hassle to deal with. She almost feels a sort of preemptive guilt.

Sirius finds his way back to her. He sits with his back to the sofa. His dark hair brushes her arm, long and unkempt.

"Fuck," he says.

"I've got a while longer," Mary forces out. "Before it gets me. I've been trying to get Yí'ān to take me back to London. I'm strong enough for sidealong."

"London's too dangerous."

"That's what he said." Reaching over to him, Mary clamps a hand as tight as she can around Sirius' shoulder. "What's happening in Britain? Something's gone... gone wrong."

Sirius hesitates. "I don't know."

"You have to know something."

He looks over his shoulder at her, mournful. Mary has never seen a human look more like a kicked puppy before.

"That's just the thing, though," he says. "Nobody knows anything. No *Direct Action* this week, and then just... radio

silence. Nothing. Yí'ān hasn't heard from any British allies in months, there was no response to your letter, and now... it's like someone's just... turned the lights off. Pretending nobody's home."

"We should go back. Or just me," Mary amends quickly, when Sirius goes bolt stiff beside her like someone's fired a gun in the next room.

"No," Sirius says. "London's more occupied by the day. Soon they'll have the whole city. The Order's probably on taken territory by now. If not yet, then soon. It's too risky."

"I sent another letter the other day," Mary murmurs. "Nothing in response to that one either."

"You should give it time," Sirius replies, and then, "why am I lying to you? We both know this whole thing is..."

Mary nods once, the only movement her neck will allow. The pain of it is sickly and horrendous, so heavy-pressing that she's worried it'll crush her completely.

"They won't reply," she murmurs. "I know."

"Something's really wrong over there."

"Maybe the whole Order died."

Sirius wraps a skinny arm around his knees, shaking his head furiously. "No," he replies. "No, they're too big for that."

"One fell swoop," Mary says miserably. "One raid on headquarters maybe, and now..."

"We can't think like that," Sirius replies, but it sounds more like an agreement than an admonishment.

They languish in mutually sorrowful silence for a while, neither speaking. A sharp, chewing pain strikes up around Mary's kidney and she drags her hands to rest atop it, as if she can suck the pain out with them. Fucked up snake venom or something.

"The potioneer," she whispers. "Who are they?"

Sirius is quiet for a bit. "Claude. My... friend."

"I didn't know you had those," Mary tries to joke, around a heavy lump sitting right in her airway.

Sirius laughs breathily. "I don't think I do anymore," he mumbles. "They hate me now. Because I... I fucked up. I always do."

"I don't think you always fuck up."

"We don't know each other. You can't know that."

Mary tries to shrug a shoulder and hisses. Each bone feels tight with a light, hollow ache. Like she's being carved out at the marrow, like a bird.

"I don't know," she murmurs. "Maybe you did fuck up. What did you do?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"I'll be dead soon. It's not like I'll tell anyone."

"Don't say that," Sirius says roughly. "You're not going to die. I'm not going to let you."

"Tell me," Mary murmurs again.

Sirius hesitates, watching the carpet intently. His head turns and he looks at the door. Like he expects something to come through it. Very slowly, he reaches a hand into his shirt and pulls out... something. A necklace, Mary thinks, unable to see it very well past his hair. No. A locket.

"This is something important," Sirius tells her. "For winning the war." He fumbles in his pocket and pulls out a small, leather-bound book, grotty with age. "This too."

"What are they?" Mary asks.

She feels some great, dark pull in her gut. Like the bad magic burrowing through her is trying to find its way out through her ribs to unite with the artefacts in Sirius' hands.

Sirius shrugs. He puts the locket and the book down on the table in front of him and seems relieved not to have them sitting in his hands any longer.

"I knew Riddle," he says after a while. "Voldemort, that is. Before the Old War started."

Mary doesn't know how to respond to that. Tentatively, she drops a hand onto his shoulder again, letting it rest there.

Sirius seems to appreciate the contact. "We were close," he says darkly.

"While you were at Hogwarts?"

He nods once. "I know where he keeps these... things. Some of them, anyway. I know him better than anybody

does. And I knew I had to go get this one so I brought Claude with me. And it went to hell.”

“But you got it.”

Sirius breathes in and then out, steadying and low. “And they paid the price for it.”

“You both made it out alive.”

“There was a potion there,” Sirius says in a rush, through a very tight throat. “It did something to them. And things in the lake... and...”

The light flicks on. Both he and Mary jump, flinching so hard the sofa creaks violently.

Yí'ān is standing in the doorway, a hand on the lightswitch, in a cloth shirt and tartan pyjama pants. He stares at Sirius for a moment.

“What are we doing talking in the dark, then?” he asks, face breaking into something cheery. “Come on, I’ll make tea.”

Sirius stares up at him. “I only just got back.”

Yí'ān gestures to the bag on the floor. “I can see that. Stay here, okay?”

There’s unspoken threat in the words. *Stay here.*

Sirius nods once. “Yí'ān—”

But Yí'ān has already stepped back into the hallway. His bare footsteps pad up to the kitchen and there’s the sound of the kettle turning on.

“Fuck,” Sirius mutters to himself. He hefts his dead arm into his lap and squeezes it there, holding it very tight like a security blanket.

“He’s not angry with you,” Mary reassures quietly.

Sirius shakes his head. “Yes he is.”

“He’s not. He just worries. You didn’t come home for...”
Mary trails off. She couldn’t tell you what the date was if you asked her too.

“About a month at this point,” Sirius finishes miserably.
“There’s stuff I need to do.”

“Like get more tattoos?” Mary points to the array down Sirius’ arms, shoulders. Now that he’s taken his jacket off, they peak around the thin sleeves of his tank top.

Sirius runs his working hand over the inked skin. “More important stuff than that.”

“What do they mean?”

“What?”

Mary tilts her head a bit, as much as her neck will let her.
“Bit specific, isn’t it? I wanted to ask last time I saw you but...”

Sirius sits up, crossing his legs and shuffling around to look at her. Mary can see them better now. Knives — a pocket knife, fixed blades, a Bowie, a karambit, a broken-glass shiv. A dozen of them. They sit along his clavicle and the tops of his shoulders and down his arms like a strange rune array.

"I don't know why I keep getting them," Sirius admits. "I think it distracts me."

Mary nods slowly. "I see," she says, even though she doesn't really.

"They're for, uh, people." He shuffles closer to her, a bit immobile, right side all floppy. They feel like broken puppets, both of them. "People I know. To remind me why I'm doing this." And he says it more like he means *to remind me why I'm still here*, but Mary doesn't mention it.

"Who's this one for?" she asks, draping a shaking hand across the top of his left shoulder. Butter knife. Soft, curved edge.

"Regulus. My brother."

"And this one?"

Sirius traces the edge of the shiv. It's jagged and half-broken, hard edges; you would have to hold it between thumb and forefinger to keep it from cutting you. "Remus."

"That one?"

"James." Sirius laughs fondly at the Bowie knife. "He never liked Bowie, that's the joke."

"Oh." Mary doesn't get it but whatever makes him feel better, she supposes. "It's... sentimental."

"It helps me a lot."

"Right."

"Like he's here."

Mary thinks of Dorcas and Marlene and burns like a church on fire; it hurts worse than the Kettering, it skitters over her like bugs. She wants to touch, wants to feel skin against her palms. She wants to remember the taste of Marlene's mouth. "Yeah."

"They probably think I've died again by now."

Mary makes a strange sound in the back of her throat. "Me too. Mine too."

"You don't think your letter got to them?"

"There must be something going wrong with the communications. They would've announced it otherwise. My family..."

Sirius gives a short nod. Like he doesn't really want to go there. He opens his mouth as if to say something and then seems to reconsider, closing it again.

"Say it," Mary instructs.

He clears his throat. "I was just going to say that if you're so convinced you're going to die, it might be better if they assume it already. No false hope."

Mary stares at him. Unbidden, tears fill her eyes. She sobs once and then again; it ricochets out of her bullet-harsh.

"Oh, fuck," Sirius says. "I'm sorry, I didn't— I didn't mean to upset you—"

He shuffles backwards, looking very uncomfortable. Mary's vision blurs and she hauls a disobedient hand up to lay across her eyes, lips curled and crunched together between

her teeth, throat all full of salt and spit. Her eyes scorch with hot pain. Her chest rattles with it.

“Oh, bloody hell,” says Yí’ān’s voice from the doorway.
“Sirius...”

“I didn’t do anything!” Sirius’ panicked voice says, before correcting, “I didn’t mean it!”

Yí’ān kneels down beside Mary, putting a gentle hand on her arm. “Try to breathe for me, okay?”

“I don’t want to die,” Mary heaves desperately, almost hyperventilating now. “I don’t want to die. I can’t die here.”

“I know.”

“You don’t!” she cries, nearly hysterical, hovering on the edge of it; madness blinks wide eyes at her, she stares into it, it stares back. Mary feels connected with herself only tangentially. One strong shake would tremble her into small pieces.

Yí’ān hugs her gently, around the shoulders. He wipes her face with his sleeve, depositing her hands in her lap. “He didn’t mean it,” he promises.

“I didn’t,” Sirius says, watching them both from the carpet. He sniffs once. “I... I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

Mary shrugs hard, hard enough that it hurts, and then does it again just to keep herself awake. “I’m scared of it. Dying.”

“Well, it won’t get to that point if I’ve got any say in it,” Yí’ān promises.

Sirius and Mary exchange looks. Neither of them says anything. A heaviness settles here, sitting between them all like a body.

Yí'ān sits there at her side for a few moments, looking like he wants to say something. Then, he sighs. "Both of you are going to be the death of me. Sirius, sit back down."

Sirius, halfway to his feet, freezes.

"You're staying for the night," Yí'ān says firmly. "And longer, if I can get it out of you."

"I can't," Sirius mumbles. "It'll just make things worse."

"It would help my peace of mind greatly to know you're safe here," Yí'ān replies, quite strained now.

They look at each other for a tense handful of seconds. Mary stares at her hands and wonders whether death would be such a bad thing.

Sirius is the first to look away. He sits back down heavily. He really does look sick. A great bag of bones held together by pale, translucent skin. All knives and hard edges. His hair needs a trim; the edges have started to split.

"Still no luck?" Yí'ān asks, and nods to the book and the locket.

Sirius goes still. "No," he says eventually.

"I didn't think so." Yí'ān reaches over to him and runs a heavy brown hand through the front of Sirius' hair to get it out of his face. "That means you can afford to stay here for a while."

“I’ve been making progress—”

Yí’ān’s hand stills in the front of Sirius’ hair, drifting down to his forehead, feeling it like you might feel for a temperature.

“You’re freezing,” he says after a moment.

“It’s not so bad.”

Yí’ān reaches out a hand and pulls up Sirius’ right sleeve. His arm beneath is blotchy like one large, long bruise. The festering black mass under the skin, held there by a long dark scar, prison bars, has gotten starker and larger since Mary saw it last. Still, light dances under there, under the black veins. Interwoven through the rot and horror of it.

“Oh, Sirius,” Yí’ān murmurs. “You should have come earlier.”

“It’s not so bad,” Sirius defends without conviction.

“Look at that and tell me it’s not so bad. Look me in the eye and tell me.”

He shrugs. “It’s because I’m not using it enough. It won’t let me.”

Yí’ān hesitates. “Because you’re afraid.”

“Maybe.”

“This is what I meant when I said we need to get you into a therapist’s office—”

“Stop it!” Sirius shouts. “Stop it with all that, I’m not going to talk to anybody! It won’t help. This is a war, not school,

and you're the one who told me to change the world, you're the one who said it was my fault Galina's dying—"

"I didn't say that!"

"You might as well have!" Sirius throws his working arm out towards Yí'ān, desperation hot in his eyes. He looks like he might start crying, but Mary knows he won't. "I know you blame me, even if you won't say it!"

"Am I not allowed to mourn her?! She's practically my mother—"

"You can do it without making me feel like— like—"

"Like what?" Yí'ān asks, and he grabs Sirius around the shoulders, holding him very tightly and staring intently into his face. "Like what?"

"Like I don't have anywhere to go," Sirius replies miserably. "I went to their place in Cannes the other day. They've moved out. Someone else is renting it now. Nobody will tell me where they went, and whenever I come here all we talk about is her. And I already fucked up and lost Remus and James, at Little Hangleton. They probably won't talk to me either if I ever see them again. They might already be dead, with everything going on in Britain, and... and..."

The steam goes out of him. Sirius shakes his head and his shoulders slump.

"I'm sorry," he says eventually.

Yí'ān shakes his head. "I never doubted you were. But you need to stop running from this."

"Running's what I'm best at."

“It won’t work anymore.”

Sirius shrugs. “Don’t know if I don’t try.”

“But you don’t mean that when you say it.”

“I do.”

Yí’ān makes a very irritable sound. “Sirius Black, you are taking the bed in the main bedroom. Or so help me.”

“But—“

“And tomorrow, we are fixing this.”

“But—“

Yí’ān holds up a hand. “We took care of you last year,” he tells Sirius. “Let me take care of you now.”

Sirius looks from Yí’ān to his dead arm and then at the door. “I need to keep visiting her.”

“Then apparate back here once you’re done.”

“I’ll make it worse for Mary.”

Mary clears her throat. “There isn’t much that could make things worse for me right now,” she tells Sirius wetly, still trying hard not to cry.

Sirius jumps like he’d forgotten she was there. His knife-thick clavicle flexes. “You’re sure?” he asks.

Mary chews her lip. She opens her mouth and then closes it again.

Sirius looks at her intently and seems to understand. In that look, a deal is struck.

“God, you are both so fucked up,” Yí’ān murmurs emphatically.

Sirius sleeps on the other sofa, despite Yí’ān’s insistence that he take the bed. By the following morning he’s gone again, like smoke on the wind.

“At least he left a note this time,” Yí’ān says glumly, as he redresses Mary’s wound by the pale daylight.

Mary nods, biting her lip, feeling the tendons of muscle under the skin there feeling the great hard lumps of them bulging tight and taut around her teeth feeling the hot moulding pain of it; she bites harder, scrapes her teeth down the rust-thick flesh until she can taste iron. A bit of blood spills out of the corner of her mouth. Juice from a fruit.

“Oh, don’t do that,” Yí’ān murmurs, and wipes at her face with his sleeve. “Only a bit longer now, chin up.”

Mary pulls her teeth out of her flesh. She swills blood and spit around in her mouth and stares from Yí’ān to the ceiling, stomach swelling and guttering with pain. The airy globular rattle of the bottom of a cup, the liquid gargling.

“What did the note say?” she asks, just to say something. It comes out a faint mumble, blood-thickened.

“I’ll be back soon,” Yí’ān quotes, rolling his eyes. “And an apology. Nothing new these days.”

“He never used to do that.”

Yí'ān nods. He pauses for a moment, antiseptic-soaked cotton pad held an inch over Mary's black-bleached ribs. The infection spreads wider each day.

"Were you two close?" he asks.

Mary hesitates. "No. Not really. He was best friends with James Potter."

"I've heard about him." Yí'ān laughs faintly, a bit knowingly. "I've heard a lot about him."

"James used to be a bit..." Mary trails off. She thinks of the James she knew in Hackney Terrace. Fidgeting fingers and very tired eyes. Always a tension in his face like he was about to start crying. Or maybe throw himself out of a high window. "He's changed a lot."

"I figured as much." Yí'ān drops the cotton pad into the bin and cuts a square of gauze from his long, thick roll of it, fingers deft around soft, springy fabric. "You've all probably changed a lot."

"Yeah."

"I've known a lot of wars. None of them quite as cruel to kids as this one."

Mary hesitates. "You didn't go to Hogwarts."

He presses the pad of gauze exceedingly gently into the wound. The gash promptly begins to try to eat it, chewing slowly.

"Ah, fuck," Yí'ān murmurs, pulling the gauze away. "Let me cut out a bigger piece."

Mary watches him as he works, saying nothing. She figures that she's probably crossed some invisible line sitting between them, huge, indomitable, silent.

"Yeah," Yí'ān says eventually. "Yeah, didn't go to Hogwarts. Durmstrang for me. Since I wasn't a citizen."

Mary winces. That would've been her, without the luck her family had. Could have easily been her. "What was it like?"

Yí'ān finishes cutting loose a larger square. He holds it up to the light, springing it out between his hands a few times. "This looks better, aye?"

Mary coughs and it hurts, it hurts, it hurts. "Yeah."

Not seeming to notice, Yí'ān lowers it to the wound and pulls out a roll of bandages. "Alright," he says. "Hold still now, it'll be over in a sec..."

The pain doesn't ever pass completely, but with the wound redressed it's easier to ignore. Yí'ān disappears off on a distress call later that day. The unanswered question sits between them and when he leaves it festers all purulent and stinking on the air of the apartment; Mary thinks it might kill her before the kettering does.

But no, even as she thinks it she knows it's a liar, because as cruel as the kettering is, there's only one real killer: the depressive, neurotic haze of boredom that clings and cloyes and does not ever go away. A month ago, her wrists were still strong enough to hold up a book to read, and two weeks ago Mary could raise her head enough to stare around the room, watching the posters. She still can on occasion, and that's the worst bit; there's nothing she *can't*

do. She could write a word. She could read a sentence. But after that she hits a wall and hits it and hits it, pounds at it screaming in her head, and it doesn't give. Energy and strength never last longer than minutes, seconds, growing quicker and lesser each day.

Hour by hour, her body is becoming less and less her own. And that's the killer. That and the boredom.

Why is it called the kettering curse? she asked Yí'ān the other day, after pondering it for six hours for lack of anything else to do. *Who named it?*

No idea, Yí'ān replied, frustratingly short an answer. *From what I've heard, it's the death eaters' name for it. One of them invented it. Maybe the big guy himself.*

But he's missing, isn't he?

They're only ever off the map when they're planning something, Yí'ān said darkly. *I'm making pasta tonight, do you want some?*

Most days go like that. Yí'ān is the busiest person Mary has ever met (save, perhaps, McGonagall while running the Order), almost always sprinting against the clock. The alarm in the comms room for distress calls goes off about once every half an hour and only a fraction of the calls get answered at all. Apparently it didn't used to be so hectic. Mary hasn't bothered to pry into whether that's because he used to have help, or because the world is getting worse. He told her once, but she doesn't remember it well. She doesn't remember anything well anymore.

Reykjavik is quiet for a city, too quiet. Sometimes the walls seem to vibrate with it, like they ache with stagnance too. Like they're afraid of their own echo too. It's a quiet city

and Mary would feel safe here, rescued here, if she could even for a moment think of anything other than Dorcas and Marlene, and James and Lily and Remus, and everyone else who might be dying or dead out there.

And herself, too. Dying and dead right here.

A bird lands on the window, startling Mary from her thoughts. A seagull with a yellow beak, orange-splotched. She stares at it for a while and it stares back at her, cocking its head, before rising back into the sky, cawing. Disappearing. Mary burns with a sudden, fierce envy she has never known before. Birds don't know how lucky they are. People don't know how lucky they are. To have so much time.

She decides she wants to see the wound again. Maybe so she can know her enemy. More likely just so she can marvel at it, the great hungry power of it, and feel like she has fallen to a suitable foe.

But getting up will be a struggle. She almost wishes Sirius would come back (she thinks he would understand this, this desire to see it, to know). But that would be too humiliating to bear and she would probably start crying.

She'll have to do it on her own, then.

Very gradually, Mary takes a long breath and tenses up every muscle in her body, just to feel whether she can. Her calves, springing hard against the sofa cushions, and then her thighs and her hips and her stomach and her chest, which curls her shoulders up around her, burnt paper. The pain of it is fantastic. Like nothing she's felt before Reykjavik, but now, commonplace, an old friend.

She tenses up her arms, clenches her fists. Mary hasn't cut her nails in weeks and they carve hot angry lines into her palms, a digging sort of pain. She squeezes harder and then pushes her hands out underneath her and tries to push herself up to sit.

Her wrists don't hold her. They tremble and yank out sideways, twisting, gammy and all tendon and no bone. Mary goes flopping back against the arm of the sofa again and all of her screams with pain. A lash of fury (she has never had a temper before this). She pushes herself back up again and falls again, and then again, and her stomach is bleeding under the bandages, sopping thin black watery pus all through her clothes, the acrid smell of it taste-it thick in the air.

"Merlin," she groans. "Oh, god."

There it is, that chewing, twitching sensation in her gut. Like a trapped nerve, like a pulsing muscle. It is laughing at her.

Mary's stomach, eyes, head — they all go hot with helpless anger. In a rush she rolls right off the side of the sofa and lands on her front on the floor.

The impact is white-hot pain, blackened with it. Her vision greys out and it knocks all the wind out of Mary's lungs. She lies there with her cheek on the carpet for what feels like centuries. Like when you doze off for a moment that feels like a full night.

When her senses come back to her, the floor is scratching an itching, nit-like storm against her skin — the front of her arms, the side of her face — and Mary rolls onto her back to get away from it. There's this horrible tickling, rushing

tingle all across her skin, right in her organs. Elevated blood pressure, or perhaps just fear.

She tells herself that she can do it. And very tenuously, Mary rolls back onto her stomach and begins to crawl towards the door, digging fists into the age-hardened carpet, ploughing chunks of it away from itself. Her nails crack against the backthread beneath it. Her chin drags against the floor. Her stomach groans and chews and gags, the blood there seeming to curdle, the smell of it going sour and septic, necrotic.

“SHIT!” Mary screams into the empty apartment. A stuttering, strangled moan scrapes out of her throat and she fumbles her hands around the bottom of the doorframe and hauls herself to it, feeling the cold hard press of the wooden knull against her ribs. There she stops for a moment, panting, each exhale almost a grunt, each inhale sob-thick.

She never used to swear much before all of this. It feels like her mind is becoming less her own, too.

She needs to see. She needs to see it. She needs to know the enemy. Like that night, Sirius in the hallway mourning her killer; she needs to know.

Mary slams a flattened hand against the floor ahead and pulls herself down across the wood, the skin of her palm rubbing and going hot with tension. She stretches out her other hand, joint of the wrist going click-click-click-click like it might come loose, and pulls herself further still, and again, and again. Half a foot at a time. Moving slow and heavy and mournful, hot with desire.

She's halfway to the front door, the bathroom sitting opposite it, when there's noise outside. The distant crack of

apparition onto the strip.

“Shit,” she murmurs to herself, and lets herself go still. Yí’ān will help her. He’ll help her.

There’s silence for a while, and then distant footsteps, staggering and slipping on the stairs. Cursing in Icelandic, or something similar. More stumbling.

Then, the key in the lock; the front door opens; Yí’ān steps inside.

Less steps, more falls. He’s bloody around the face, red-black ichor dripping out of his hairline and into his eyes like someone’s tried to split open his skull with a cleaver. He’s clutching his ribs like they might be broken and he staggers and slips on mangled feet, slamming the door closed with his back and then hitting the ground on his knees.

“Oh, fuck,” he spits, an amount of blood with it. And then, “Mary?”

“Needed the bathroom,” she groans. “Are you okay?”

Yí’ān flops onto his stomach. They both lie there like that, looking at each other. Mary can’t decide which should be helping the other.

“Bad mission,” he grits out eventually. “Are *you* okay?”

“I’m okay,” Mary says, not knowing whether, in relative terms, it’s true. “I’m okay.”

“Good.” Yí’ān dribbles a bit of blood out between cracked lips. “Me too.”

“What happened?”

“Ambush. Ljubljana.” He reaches up to try to hold the splitting skin of his hairline together with one hand. “Apparently some idiot’s been burning down death eaters’ houses in the area and didn’t think to alert any of us. They’ve heightened their security. They were on us the moment we apparated in.”

“Did anybody die?”

“Three. Didn’t know any of them.” Yí’ān rests his cheek against the floor and sighs, sounding very defeated.

“I’m sorry,” Mary murmurs, feeling the kettering chuckle inside her ribs, an arrhythmic rattle.

“It’s fine. Happens all the time these days.”

“Did you manage to save whoever made the call?”

Yí’ān doesn’t look at her. “No,” he says.

Sirius finds them an hour later, by which point Yí’ān looks close to passing out. Neither of them has moved, maybe because they can’t or maybe because it feels hopeless to try.

“Oh, fuck ,” he says, dropping his backpack on the floor. “I was wondering why there was blood in the hallway.”

Yí’ān makes a faint, almost congratulatory noise. “Deja vu, right?”

Sirius closes the door behind him. “You left the door upstairs open. And this one.”

“Just help me, please,” Yí’ān replies tightly.

Sirius drops down beside him. "Tell me where it hurts. Hi, Mary."

"Hi, Sirius," Mary replies, half-asleep. Most of her has gone dead, pins-and-needlesish.

Yí'ān gestures vaguely to the part of his head that isn't holding itself together properly. "Might want to start there," he groans.

"Didn't think you had a lobotomy planned for today," Sirius replies, hands shaking so violently they're almost a hummingbird blur.

"Well, the death eaters had other plans."

"Death eaters? Where?"

"Slovenia. They're spreading east."

"Oh," Sirius murmurs, and stares at nothing for a moment.

"Any luck with the horcruxes?" Yí'ān asks, a little pointedly.

Sirius seems to snap back to himself. "I'll go get the med kit," he mutters.

"We made a deal," Mary starts.

Sirius looks up from his can of cold beef stew. He didn't bother to heat it up. "Tonight's not the night," he sighs.

"But we did."

"Yí'ān's half dead. Can you give it a few days?"

"You'll run off again."

Sirius looks at her with hard eyes and then looks away. He's got a sharpness growing between his brows, deepening with the days.

"I won't leave again," he mutters. "Not until he's back on his feet."

"Broken ribs, was it? And his head. And his feet."

"Nothing so bad he won't be able to heal it magically. Just... in a few days. When he's stronger."

Mary nods shortly. "Then after that, we'll go."

"Why do you want to?"

She hesitates. "I want to see somewhere that isn't this apartment. Before I go."

"You're not going to die," Sirius snaps.

"Had any luck finding Claude?" Mary doesn't wait for an answer. "I didn't think so."

"We don't know that it'll kill you."

Mary raises the bottom of her shirt. Since this afternoon, the wound has bled through black, so thick it's a void. Sirius looks away, unable to see it for long. His throat pulses, perhaps with a repressed gag.

"Please," Mary murmurs. "I can stand sidealong. I'm still strong enough for that."

"It's grim out there," Sirius warns.

"Not if it's the last thing I'll get to see."

“Why are you so determined to die?”

“I’m not,” she replies. “I just know.” And she nods at Sirius’ arm, sprawled limp in his lap. “You know, too.”

And she can see by the look on Sirius’ face that he knows, he knows it better than anything. That thing, whatever is in his arm, is killing him just as much as the kettering is killing Mary.

“That’s different,” he mutters. “There are still things I need to do first. Before it eats me.”

“There are still things I need to do too. Like see the sky again.”

Sirius nods to the window.

“Properly,” Mary amends. “Properly see it.”

He considers that for a while, watching her. Mary watches him right back and in a way they consume each other. They’re more similar than they’ve ever been. Mary has never been able to relate to Sirius Black in all her life and she didn’t imagine that she would start now, here, in the swirling quiet heart of the New War. With nothing left to do but wait and mourn.

“Fine,” Sirius says. “Once he’s okay again.”

“He said something about fear,” Mary says, before she can help herself. “Fear being what’s doing it.” And she nods to his arm again, even though it hurts deep in her neck like a bone out of place, pressing cold tension into the front of her windpipe.

Sirius runs the fingers of his left hand over the bloated black skin of his right. The fingers have gone overripe, spotted, like a plague has taken them.

“Something like that,” he agrees.

“What gave you it? The injury.”

“It’s not an injury. More like a weapon.”

“Evidently not working,” she replies.

Sirius laughs wetly and rubs his face. “I need to be angry,” he says eventually. “To tame it. I need to hate.”

“There’s lots of stuff to hate right now.”

He nods. “But I’ve been hating for a long time and I think I’ve started to forget how to do it right. I’m too afraid to be angry anymore. It sits in me like a fucking— a fucking— a... sickness.”

Mary almost says ‘me too’ and decides not to. “It’ll suck if we both die.”

Sirius nods dourly. “It will, won’t it?”

“No way to say goodbye to them.”

“James,” Sirius agrees. “Remus.”

“Marlene. Dorcas. Lily.”

“Regulus. Peter. Claude.”

“My parents.”

“My uncle. Mr and Mrs Potter.”

“Hestia and Alice and all the rest still in Britain.”

Sirius holds his left arm out to her, nodding his head to the bicep, along which sits a heavy carving knife, the type you would use for meat. “That one’s for Galina.”

“The dying woman.”

“I killed her.”

“I’m sure that’s not true.”

He shrugs and pulls his arm back. “It feels like it’s true.”

Mary is quiet for a bit. “We’re going to make each other miserable if we keep talking.”

Sirius nods. “What’s it been like? Living here.”

“Lonely. Painful. Every moment is a small death.”

“Cheerful.”

“What about you?”

Sirius fiddles with the hem of his trousers. “I’ve been running mostly,” he says. “Staying in hostels and sleeping rough. I visit her lots. She’s sleeping most of the time.”

“Galina.”

“Yeah.”

“Right.”

He lifts his right arm up and lets it flop back down into his lap like it’s funny, like it’s a big game. He’s not laughing, though. “I look for Claude. I try to destroy the...”

“Horcruxes? That’s what he called them.”

“Don’t repeat that word to anybody.”

“I won’t get the chance.”

“This is so fucking depressing,” Sirius says. “Yes. I try to destroy the horcruxes. The diary and the locket. And as you can probably tell, it’s not going very well.”

“I’d gotten the impression,” Mary agrees. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It’s my own fault.”

She thinks she should probably try to rebuke that, but can’t come up with the right way to go about it, so says nothing. Sirius says nothing too. They fall back into silence, him sitting on one sofa, her lying on the other, Yíān sleeping silently in the bedroom. This place has always felt out of time, like some parallel dimension, but with Sirius it feels moreso. This is where he ran after the Rosier Wedding, after they took over the ministry, Mary knows. It feels like a cemetery masquerading as a refuge.

“We’ll go soon,” Sirius promises eventually. “I’ll take you to Hungary to see her.”

“Is it pretty out there?”

He nods once. “It’s pretty out there.”

Yíān wakes up the following morning, wrestles his wand back off Sirius and tries to stitch his own ribs back together with it, despite being monstrously concussed. Predictably, it

doesn't work, and he ends up resigning himself to a few more days of rest at least.

"I'm sorry you had to see me like that," he calls to Mary down the hallway, both of them bedridden. "Nasty, that mission was."

"No worries," Mary shouts back to him. "Sorry you had to see me like that."

"We're in a right state, aren't we?"

"Yeah."

Sirius flutters between them, a jumpy ghost, never quite settled. A few times he hovers near the front door, as if waiting to leave, and then seems to give up on the idea. He watches comms and doesn't respond to a single distress call. He makes a lot of tea.

"You people do that a lot," Mary tells him, when he brings her her fourth cup of the day, all the others sitting undrunk and cold at her side. "Making tea like it'll fix your problems."

Sirius shrugs. "The British way."

"I wouldn't know."

"Suppose it's been so long I wouldn't either," he agrees.

The days pass in quiet, oppressive mournfulness. It storms the whole following night, the sound of it howling loud and rapturing against the windows. Sirius does not sleep, lying awake on the floor all night with his arm clutched tight against himself, and Mary doesn't either, too restless with tension, too alive with pain that worsens in the cold. The

kettering never leaves her alone. It chews and hacks and laughs long into the night, jeering in the juncture between her kidney and her liver.

Yí'ān manages to heal himself up properly three days after the distress call gone wrong. Mary hears all of it: the pop of magic, the sound of his exhale, and the creak of the bed as he stands on his own. There's a stuttering, flinching breath and the sound of Sirius' voice muffled into Yí'ān's shoulder, apologising for something like the something doesn't need elaboration on.

"It's okay," Yí'ān promises gently. "You're okay."

Mary thinks of Marlene and decides that if she could, she would have died that night in central London, outside the museum, Dorcas nearby. It would've been simpler.

They all eat together that night. Mostly quiet. A sort of Last Supper, one of many. The morbid, the absurd, sits low over them, watching. Chances are none of them will live to see next summer. Mary figured out the other day that it's November. It burns with a painful irony that she'll die before Christmas. Her dad's a Catholic and her mother never talked about god. She wishes she'd had the chance to figure out how she felt about all of that.

The following morning, without announcing it, Sirius wakes her up at the crack of dawn and slots his arm around the underside of Mary's shoulders, hauling her to her feet. She bites right through her lip and leaves the flesh of it ragged in her mouth, torn like a bin bag.

"You okay?" he asks her, and it's not a question.

Mary nods once. "Fine," she says, the 'f' not coming out right through the gore of it.

They hobble, leaning heavily on each other, to the door. Mary's legs don't work, the muscles atrophied with time and the kettering. The ankles twist in on themselves and Sirius mostly carries her, though he doesn't complain. It's an unspeakable pain, something she can't verbalise right. She's almost crying but her eyes are shut so tight nothing can get out.

Blind, they reach the front door. Sirius pulls her out and closes it behind them both, locking it. Mary's chest is rattling with retches that don't make sound. She can feel her face crumpled up by them.

"It's alright," Sirius tells her. "We just need to get to the strip. Come on. Bit further now."

They make for the stairs. Mary's feet drag more than they take steps, almost overturned, the tops of them vertical. She crushes her cheek into Sirius' shoulder and he pinches cold fingers around her underarm to keep her against him. They take unsteady, liling steps, staggering left and right like drunkards.

"Sure you want to do this?" he asks her in a murmur.

Mary nods. She isn't sure; she hasn't been sure of anything for a while. But she can't stop now. "I'm sure."

"Then hold on tight." And he starts to haul her up the stairs, step by aching step, the pressure of each raised leg immense against her stomach. Mary doesn't complain. She tangles bits of torn lip between her teeth and flexes her jaw left and right, crunching her molars together, trying to chip them flat. It isn't a worthy distraction. But it's all she's got.

They hit the top of the stairs. In a haze of pain, Mary is dragged to the door and then the cold Icelandic air hits her.

She opens her eyes and it's dark despite the hour, and it's biting, freezing, the wind icy with spots of rain that hurt as they hit her face.

Mary breathes in a long breath. The smell of the ocean; the smell of wet grass; the smell of cars, petrol, industry. It's like being alive again. She sobs with relief.

Sirius drags her to the flat spot of brown grass in front of the apartment block. He tightens his grip on her.

"Ready?" he asks.

Mary nods against him. "Do it," she hisses.

Sirius takes a deep breath. He stares intently down at his arm. Mary watches it too, watches the flexing of the blackened skin, a false heart.

"Come on," he murmurs. "Please. Please. Please."

Mary clears her throat, a glob of hardened blood stuck in there. "You need to be angry?"

"Yeah." He looks up at her.

She thinks fast, desperate. She needs to get out of here, needs to be anywhere other than Iceland. "You-know-who wants James," she says in a rush. "James is wanted now. Almost as badly as you. He's looking for him."

Sirius goes deadly still. His arm seems to twitch and the lights dancing beneath the skin blink.

The curling crushing gasp of apparition closes in around them and they're gone.

Galina Kovalenko is pale as death on the daisy yellow hospice bed they have laid her out on. Her skin is grey underneath the first few layers, and the veins in her eyelids are black. She doesn't twitch as Sirius and Mary stumble in, and Sirius deposits Mary into a chair.

Mary's vision is so blurry with pain that she's surprised she's still awake. She sprawls mostly limp in the seat beside the bed and flexes her jaw left and right, trying to get some feeling back into it.

"Sorry I couldn't apparate us closer," Sirius says, and flops into the chair on the other side of the bed. Under the flickering white lights overhead, magically suspended there, he looks ghostly. "There are wards up against people who've never visited before."

Mary hoicks up a mouthful of bloody spit, barely able to raise her arm to catch it in her sleeve. "You were right," she mumbles, dropping her hand and looking out of the window. "It is beautiful."

This part of Hungary is very desolate, far-flung from any nearby towns. The flats of broad, greying fields stretch for miles around, cordoned by rows of high green hedging and the distant shapes of farmhouses on the horizon. Lavender fields cast the horizon into a line of brilliant purple, the colours melding together into a jewel-toned strip. It's a miserable day but even despite that, the grey sky makes the whole picture pale and unobtrusive. A still, cold landscape portrait, curling thick with heavy mist.

"I come here a lot," Sirius says absently. He's not looking at Mary; his eyes are glued to the woman in the bed, who on closer inspection looks to be in her fifties or sixties, fast asleep and dead to the world.

Mary hesitates. "Are you going to wake her up?"

"I don't know. Usually I don't. The healers tell me to let her rest." Sirius hesitates, left hand hovering over Galina's papery white face. "But it feels cruel. To let her sleep. Since she's got so little time left. Feels like we should be using the most of it. Like she'd want me to wake her up and I'm taking that away from her if I don't."

"Oh."

"But I never know what to say." Sirius puts his left hand in Galina's limp one and squeezes until it probably hurts.

"Does she blame you? For whatever happened?"

"No. Well. She says she doesn't."

"Do you believe her?"

"Of course not," Sirius dismisses. "I'd blame me, if I was her."

Mary traces the black veins of Galina's shrivelled right hand up her arm, up her neck. "Is it the kettering curse? It looks the same."

"Dark magic always looks the same," Sirius says wryly, gesturing to his arm. "The three of us match. But no. It's not."

"And I suppose I'm not supposed to ask."

"Yeah."

"Well I'm going to."

Sirius' grip on Galina's hand gets tighter. It seems like he always needs something to hold onto; like he's afraid if he lets go he'll float away. Or drown.

"Little Hangleton," he says.

"Oh," Mary replies. "Right."

They fall silent again. Mary manages to heft her heavy arms up to wrap around her stomach, watching the rolling fields out of the window as if there's anything to see out there. The Kórház is quiet and peaceful, probably charmed that way. A tall, converted old factory, owned by magical folks since the first war, first in use during Grindelwald's era. For the dying and the dead. Mary has seen seven ghosts already, and the healers have similar appearances, all sallow and a bit crumpled. Galina has her own room, a luxury most probably can't afford in the other magical hospitals of Europe right now.

"You were close with her?" Mary asks after a while. It's probably the wrong thing to say; she doesn't care.

Sirius hums. "I was."

"How long does she have?"

"A few weeks now. If that." His grip on her hand loosens and then tightens again. He leans forwards to rest his cheek on the edge of the bed, watching Galina like he expects her to die at any moment.

"I'm sorry," Mary murmurs.

"Don't be." Sirius doesn't look at her. "Christ it's cold in here."

It's not cold in the slightest; it's an ambient, near-warm temperature. Probably charmed that way. Mary doesn't mention it.

"We should go soon," she murmurs. "If you start crying I'll cry too."

Sirius laughs, vaguely choked. "I'll do my best not to."

"Okay," Mary agrees. "If you want a hug—"

"I don't," Sirius reassures.

"Right. I couldn't give you one anyway, so I guess it's for the best."

"Yeah."

"Yeah."

Galina doesn't stir, not waking even as Sirius fiddles with her fingers, right arm dangling from his shoulder, swinging with the fingertips a few inches from the floor. They really do all match.

"You really think nobody here could help me?" Mary asks, after some time has passed.

Sirius draws a shaking breath. "I've asked a lot," he says. "But they don't heal here. Just ease pain. They slowed Galina's infection down but not by much. And they can't do anything about the kettering curse, they've never heard of it."

Mary snorts a laugh through her nose. "When I'm gone," she says, "find whoever invented it and kill them for me. Okay?"

"I'm not sure I'm up for that," Sirius admits, though he's laughing a bit too. "This thing is useless." He flops his arm around.

"Get someone else to do it," Mary suggests. "Remus maybe."

"Why not James?"

"I don't think he's up for it either."

Sirius sobers. "Maybe not," he agrees. "Is it true? What you said about..."

"He's undesirable number two," Mary assents. "Still goes on missions, though. Not as much as Dorcas. He's got something wrong with his chest. New War injury." *Like me.*

"Oh." Sirius glances down at his own chest, as if by all rights he should be able to feel the pain of it too. Then, he glances down at his own hand, and then back up at Mary. "I need a favour."

Mary squints at him. "What is it?"

"You need to..." Sirius hesitates, looking down at Galina, and then back up at Mary. "We should go somewhere else."

More apparition will kill her. But she's going to die anyway. Mary nods.

"Give me a minute," Sirius murmurs. "Just to say goodbye."

"Alright."

He turns to Galina and lowers his head close to her pillow, murmuring. Mary tunes it out, busying herself peering around as far as her stiff, weak neck will allow. She doesn't

want to observe this; mostly because she's afraid it'll make her jealous. At least he gets to say goodbye. There's nobody here to say goodbye to her and that makes her simmer with quiet resentment. But being here is miles better than being stuck on the sofa in Reykjavik, she supposes.

When Sirius is done, he stands up, letting go of Galina's hand very reluctantly. He takes it and then lets it go again and she still doesn't wake up again. Mary would have thought she was dead if it wasn't for the beeping of the heart monitor at the side of her bed, magical, charmed to ring like tonal bells.

"Well then." Sirius crosses around the bed to Mary's side and claps a hand onto her shoulder. "I won't make you get up. Ready?"

"Can I take the chair?" Mary asks.

"They won't miss it," Sirius shrugs.

Mary wraps her hands tightly around the arms of the chair and nods once. Sirius pulls them both into the ether, emptiness screaming in a twister around them, almost a tornado. His hand seems to glue itself around her shoulder and she sees the dark mass of his other wrist whip out in the darkness, the world distorting; they hit the ground, the chair rocking dangerously backwards on both legs.

Sirius steadies it while Mary catches her breath, clutching at her stomach. They're in a broad, barren field, still Hungary by the looks of it. Lavender grows in purpling clumps around its border, ripe and still.

"Shit," Mary grits out, feeling her bones settle into their sockets again. Nausea swims through her and she thinks

she might throw up in her lap but manages to keep it down, forcing bile back into her stomach.

Sirius yanks the locket out of his shirt and throws it to the ground ten feet away, pacing from Mary to put a distance between them.

"You okay?" he asks over his shoulder.

Of course she isn't okay. How could anybody in this situation, in this body, be okay? "Fine," Mary calls, through a clenched jaw and grinding teeth.

"Good." Sirius comes to a stop twenty feet from Mary, the locket on the ground between them. He stares at it, dark eyes squinted very narrow. "You look like shit."

"So do you," Mary shouts back.

A faint smile, which falls quickly. Against the grey sky, Sirius is more thunder than person, the crackling burning type, thick with fearful tension. His arm hangs disused at his side, its blackened flesh swollen, lolling slightly in the wind.

"Tell me," he instructs her. "Tell me about James."

Mary gets it then. The other half of this deal they have struck. She shuffles a bit in her chair, feeling the pinch-it scratch-it biting pain in her midriff strike up a fierce chorus.

"He doesn't breathe properly," she calls into the windless air. "They didn't heal his chest right, so he can't run very far anymore. He's in pain a lot."

Even from this far away, she sees the tendons in Sirius' neck jump. It seems to make him wider. Larger than life.

His hand jumps a bit at his side, the fingers twitching.

“He has nightmares a lot too,” Mary continues, feeling her throat strain with it. “Since Little Hangleton. He says your name in his sleep.”

The hand starts to raise. Alien and strange, wind whips through the silence around them, the grass beginning to tremble with it.

He wants anger. So give him anger.

Mary raises her voice, despite the straining in her throat, despite the ache of it. “He’s a mess,” she calls. “And the death eaters want him. We don’t know why. We never figured it out. But one of these days they’ll get him.”

Sirius’ arm is horizontal now, held out in front of him, the fingers clawed, palm down. The wind whips louder, a swirling vortex around them, him in the centre of the storm. It sends his hair into a black clouded mess around his head, ripping around in great dark blustering tangles.

“Remus left him!” Mary calls. *Truth.* “Lily too!” *Truth.* “He used to tell me he was scared—” *Lie.* “He used to say he was scared of you-know-who—” *Lie.* “He said he wished you’d never left—” *Truth.* “He said he never wants see you again—” *Lie. Big fat lie.*

Sirius’ eyes close and his face screws up. His form seems to ripple and something bright and hot bursts out of his fingertips, which he extends until his hand is stretched out flat. Electricity crackles on the air and the wind rears into a howling mass, whipping grass clear out of the earth, scattering clumps of dirt. Mary squeezes her eyes shut very tight and there is a terrific bang.

The wind dies. When Mary looks up again, the air is thick with dust and Sirius is halfway down to his knees, shoulders knotted tight. The locket is lying in a smoking pit of burnt-husk grass between them, unbroken.

“Shit!” Sirius shouts very breathily. He hauls himself to his feet and then hits his knees again.

“It wasn’t enough?” Mary calls.

He shakes his head once. “Not nearly enough.” And he looks up at her. “Again. Tell me more.”

Chapter End Notes

- [Official Tumblr](#)
- [Twitter Quotes Bot](#) (admin: [lupinlesbian](#))
- [Pinterest Board](#) (admin: [plantfeline](#))
- [Fic Playlist](#)
- [Podfic](#)

If you’re enjoying this fic, please considering leaving me a comment or an [ask](#)!

A BURNING

Chapter Notes

apologies for the lack of comment replies! in my defence i'm a maniac

BIG WARNING FOR THIS CHAPTER: during this chapter a character is heavily implied to have been interrupted in the process of attempting suicide. this is non-graphic but it is discussed in relative depth. if this is in any way upsetting to you, i encourage you to give this chapter a miss and reach out to me for a summarised version.

enjoy! this one killed me to write. hope it kills you to read <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Heavy black smog hovers low over London, thick enough to make Dorcas' throat all scratchy and hollow with it. Her lungs feel like hot things, burning inside her ribs, straining out against them, not enough air in them. She crouches with a knee on the cold ground and the other pressed with its side to the wall and hears James come to a kneeling stop behind her, wheezing and gasping with the ash. She can hear his hand scrambling cold blueish fingers across the front of his chest. The smoke in the air has made him like this for weeks.

"Stay quiet," she murmurs back to him.

He heaves another breath and it creaks on the way in. "I can't... help it..." he huffs. "It's in my throat."

Dorcas glances over her shoulder at him very briefly, quickly enough that she catches his face in the moonlight only as a blur, glasses with a hairline crack, big eyes peering through them at her.

She looks back ahead, out towards the dark mouth of the alleyway across the intersecting street, a broad dark dual carriageway on the outskirts of Old Magical London. "Just try," she murmurs. "They're close."

The death eaters' patrol has been spreading out and out since the beginnings of the occupation, casting its grip over the west side of central London. There are a thousand muggles rehomed by now and a few hundred dead or hospitalised, the kettering curse burning great dark born-again gouges into their stomachs and ribs like burrowing worms.

Behind her, James coughs once, a ragged thing. Then he freezes up, a hand landing on her shoulder. "Listen."

Dorcas peers into the darkness ahead, sinking into the wall with her shoulder dug tight against it, pressed almost to her ear. She hears birds, most of them migrating northwest to get away from Newhaven, in great flocks in the night sky above. She hears distant cars, far from this area. She hears the hum of a sparking rioting electrical wire disconnected in a wall nearby, exposed by a ricocheting spell or explosion. Night, that's the sound of it, the murmur of the wind. The approach of—

"Footsteps," she murmurs, hearing them then. Echoing from some intersecting alley nearby, across the street past the empty husks of abandoned nightclubs and restaurants. Distant and drawing closer.

She feels more than hears James nod. He drags in a long breath and it makes a throaty groaning broken-machinery sound right in his airway. "Coming this way."

"Reckon it's him?"

"Only one way to find out."

Dorcas clenches her hand around the brass knuckles in her pocket, fumbling them on. They were from Lily, a hurried parting gift after the raid on the train, before she took the muggleborns back to Rostock. She pressed them into Dorcas' hand with tears in her eyes while James and Remus shouted at each other on the other side of the roof, and then she was gone just like Peter and the train. They don't quite fit Dorcas right, too small for her fingers; she can always feel her pulse when she's wearing them. An inherited reminder that she's still alive.

James slides his bat from the wincing, creaking leather of the back of his jacket, swinging it down to rest against his side. The rounded wooden tip clatters sharp against the wet concrete beneath them. A bit of falling ash gets in Dorcas' nose and she snorts it out, watching the moonlit fleck of it swirl in the dead air.

The footsteps draw closer still, clicking. Expensive shoes and a steady stride. One-two-one-two-one-two. No limp. It's him; it has to be. They can't afford another failed mission, and the Order can't afford for Dorcas and James to die here, not with how many of them have been dying recently.

"Get ready," James murmurs, almost resting upon her. He's taut with tension and he says it right into her ear.

Dorcas resists the urge to shove him off. "Yeah. Shh."

They listen intently, neither of them moving or making any sound (presumably James has figured out that he's less useful breathing than not). The clacking footsteps make their way out of the sidestreet across the way and begin across the dual carriageway; there's the telltale clicking heaviness of a step from the curb into the road, and then concrete-dulled snap, snap, snap, snap. Each footfall echoes.

Whoever it is, Harrods or some other bastard, they're coming right this way.

Twenty feet away. Ten. Dorcas raises herself to her feet exponentially slowly, James a shadow behind her, and raises her fists.

The figure appears around the side of the alleyway and Dorcas launches at him, throwing heavy arms up around his throat and squeezing his jugular in the crook of her elbow as she gets half-behind him. She tries to drive him to his knees; he's taller, stronger; he tries to force her off but his robe gets stuck under one of his feet and James cracks his bat into the side of the death eater's thigh and forces him to the ground. Dorcas wrestles him onto his front and forces her knee against the dark curve of the back of his head, holding it there with a hand in his hair and using her thigh to crack his face down into the pavement with force.

A sharp shout of pain. They can't afford to be overheard. James shoves Dorcas off and rolls the man over; the death eater promptly kicks him in the stomach and he shouts and staggers back against the wall, winded. Dorcas swallows nervous spit and slams her jarred foot once into the ground, trying to set it right. The death eater rises to his feet, stumbling like a drunk, and she swings in from his blind

spot and grabs him by the front of his robes. She shoves him up against the wall, knife to his throat.

“Don’t move,” Dorcas warns. “You’re important, but you’re not that important.”

Darting blue eyes stare back at her. The man — it is Harrods, it is, victory sparks a bushfire inside of Dorcas — looks like he’s seen better days. Beneath the bloody nose and broken teeth he looks like he hasn’t had a night’s sleep in months, more raccoon-eyed than Dorcas and James combined.

He tries to scramble out of her grip, feet kicking at Dorcas’ knees. She presses the knife harder to his throat and he seems to realise that it’s there.

“I told you not to move,” Dorcas warns. “Give us the information we need and we’ll let you go.”

Against the wall behind her, James is coughing with a sort of panic, like he’s trying to get them all out of him. He hacks and spits and heaves loud wheezing breaths one after the other in uniform rapidity, not getting any coherent words out. Dorcas does her best to ignore him, not taking her eyes off the death eater.

Harrods’ struggling slows. He looks like he’s trying very hard to think of a way to talk his way out of this one. His beady eyes dart from James to Dorcas and back to James.

“Look at me, not him,” Dorcas instructs. She raises her chin and tips the point of her knife upwards to rest in the cleft of his neck, the juncture under his jaw. If she drove it upwards it would go up through the bottom of his mouth and skewer his tongue deep into his sinuses. The flat edge of the knife

whines against her brass knuckles, a metallic shrieking, faint in the overly-loud nighttime.

“Okay.” Harrods looks at her, swallowing hard. He’s trying and failing to regulate his breathing. To look like he’s in control here, like this is his deal to strike. “What do you want to know?”

“Not very loyal, is he?” James groans from behind Dorcas, slumped halfway down the wall with his legs a weedy tangle under him.

Dorcas digs the tip of her knife a bit deeper into the underside of Harrods’ stubbly chin. “We want to know about the stronghold in Barnet. Where you’re keeping captives. Tell us about it.”

Harrods eyes her. “You’re with the Order?”

Dorcas doesn’t nod or shake her head, doesn’t offer him anything. “This isn’t about us. Tell us about the stronghold.”

Harrods’ throat flexes. “It’s a prison,” he says. “For traitors to the Dark Lord.”

“No it’s not,” James wheezes. “Liar.”

“Shut up James,” Dorcas snaps. She doesn’t look away from Harrods’ grey-white face. “It’s a containment facility, but we know it’s not permanent. It’s where you keep them before you move them overseas. We’ve been watching.”

Harrods curses under his breath. “We don’t move them. We kill them.”

“We can hear the apparition cracks from outside.”

“That’s visitors coming and going.”

Dorcas laughs, throaty. She spits out a bit of ash that gets in her mouth, right into Harrods’ smug face. “You allow visitors now? How civil. Tell me the truth. Quickly now, before we decide we should find someone more reliable.”

As if to make her point, Dorcas digs her blade in a bit deeper again. A droplet of blood drips down the metal, dark in the dim light, and the elastic-taut skin of Harrods’ neck audibly tears open in a long, thin line, only surface-deep, threatening something more deadly.

“Slovenia,” he says quickly. “We usually take prisoners to Slovenia. We have a stronghold out there.”

“That’s where you transfer the Barnet captives?”

“Until recently.”

“Why?”

“It was burnt down. Destroyed.”

Dorcas hesitates. “By who?”

Harrods laughs, nervous and flighty like a bird. “Whoever it is, they’ve pissed off the Dark Lord mightily. Their days are numbered.” And his eyes narrow a bit. “So, it seems, are yours.”

James pushes to his feet. “Don’t threaten her—”

“James,” Dorcas murmurs. She looks around. “We need to go—” She lets go of Harrods and he staggers away, gasping and pressing pale hands to his split-open neck.

James reaches her side, clutching her arm. “Why?”

Dorcas nods across the dual carriageway to the mouth of the opposite alleyway, the end of it fifty feet away. Three dark-robed figures at the mouth of the sidestreet, approaching from the heart of Old Magical London. Striding right for them.

“Oh, fuck,” James says. He grabs Dorcas’ arm tight and says, “Are we killing Harrods, then?”

“Did he see your face?” Dorcas mutters into his ear.

“Too dark.”

“Then we can afford to let him go.”

“He saw you—”

“I’m not you,” Dorcas says shortly. She tugs James’ arm. “Run!”

James takes off down the alleyway the way they came, back north away from Old Magical London. Dorcas sprints after him, fists clenched tight and pounding rushing punching through the air at her sides; each footstep reverberates like a chthonic toll through her, jarring her knees. There is fire and brimstone in her lungs.

They fly through the darkness. James will not be able to run for long. This Dorcas knows with clarity, better than she knows most things these days, because knowing has become something almost as thin-on-the-ground as space and time, both having become limited resources.

Behind them, there are running footsteps and shouting. A sickly yellow burst of light flies over their heads, illuminating swirling clumps of ash on the air like snow in the headlights of a car.

“James!” Dorcas calls. She speeds up and catches his arm, running alongside him. “When I turn off, you follow me!”

He nods, grunting and huffing and unable to get any words out. His face is so taut and tense that he might as well be carved from wood, each footstep staggering and liling.

Dorcas glances once over her shoulder. The death eaters are crossing the dual carriageway behind them, running across the empty road with heavy smoke-filled nighttime closing in around them. She and James reach the mouth of the alleyway, leading onto the next street, and, thinking fast, Dorcas pulls James around the corner and west up the road, over cracked pavement and leaky drains, an old suitcase flung across the ground, the last remnants of the people who lived and worked here once.

“Where are we going?!” James shouts at her.

“I don’t—” And Dorcas spies it at the end of the street; the entrance to a dark, gutted arcade, narrow and winding, which leads between the blocks north, full of unused shops and abandoned little nooks. “There! Come on!”

James is already faltering, hands tearing at the collar of his shirt like it’s strangling him. Dorcas grabs him around the bicep and pulls him with her until he’s staggering over his own feet; they reach the other side of the road and come upon the entrance to the arcade and just as they skid around its dark entrance, the blackness inside a monolith, a red spell shatters the stained glass over the entryway, which rains down over them.

James shouts out and Dorcas doesn’t stop running; she pulls him into the cold, still, dark universe and they pound down the cobbled walkway together. The roof of the arcade is old, grimy glass, stained and blotchy with ash and age,

and it lets only the occasional spot of moonlight through, which dapple the floor in hazy bubbles of light. The arcade winds left and then right, dark windows flashing around them.

Every sound echoes. When the death eaters enter the arcade behind them, their shouts and ringing footsteps multiply into a howling chorus around them. Dorcas' throat fills up with panic; she doesn't want to die here, she can't die here, not before... not before...

James locks his hand around her wrist and heaves Dorcas to the left and through a narrow doorway. Stairs. Dorcas almost cries with disbelief, with crashing relief. There are no lights and no moonlight follows them; she and James fumble their way up the thief's-step stairs two at a time, falling over each other and around the corner to the second flight, before coming out at the top, where a narrow overhanging balcony looks down over the arcade floor

Dorcas and James hover there in the dark for a moment, peering around. Flashes of spellfire cast colourful bursts of light up the walkway towards them, but the death eaters are still out of sight. If they linger at the top of the stairs, they're vulnerable, too exposed. One flying spell will light them up.

"Come on," Dorcas murmurs, and hauls James to his feet. She pads as silently as she can across the overhang and towards one of the few shopfronts on the upper level, a narrow music store with broken windows and tipped-over cellos and violins scattered across the floor in the dust, barely illuminated by the glass ceiling above them.

James climbs in first, still wheezing, and Dorcas follows, almost tripping over a cello. They hold each other by the

arms and fumble their way through the dark, cramped old shop to the very back, where a desk and till sit tight to the wall.

"Here," James murmurs, kneeling behind the wooden bordeaux. "Come on."

Dorcas crouches beside him, drawing her knees to her chest. They press in back to back. Neither of them makes a sound.

Downstairs, the death eaters get closer and closer and closer, their loud footsteps cracking against the cobblestone. Hazy bursts and lashes of spellfire cast the walls of the broken little instrument shop into planes of red and green light, leaving imprints on Dorcas' eyes. She feels James heaving silently behind her, trying not to cough, trying so hard it lurches through his chest like he's gagging or throwing up. It is almost sobbing.

"Shh," she breathes. "Shhh."

"I'm trying," James hisses, the sound of it going broken in the middle. He pounds his chest with the side of his fist, a low, rhythmic thumping.

Down in the arcade, a shopfront window shatters; there is the sound of a curse whizzing through the darkness and towards the north exit.

"Come on!" one of the death eaters shouts. "They went this way!"

For a heartstopping moment, Dorcas thinks she will hear the pounding of footsteps on the stairs, or the call of *hominem revelio*. But the death eaters' snapping footsteps

crash up the arcade north and away from them, towards the outskirts of Old Magical London.

James is twitching like a dead thing beside her. He coughs pathetically, quietly, once they're far away enough that their voices have dulled. "Fuck," he whispers.

"Good job staying quiet," Dorcas tells him, realising only afterwards that she's not sure whether it's supposed to be sarcastic or not.

He slumps heavily against her back. "Hurts."

"I know."

"Are we making a break for it? They'll come back this way eventually."

"Not the brightest," Dorcas replies. "They'll be a while. Sit still. Get your breath back."

Obediently, James sucks in a few breaths, letting them out a hair too quickly, forced from his lungs one after the other.

"You reckon Harrods was telling the truth?"

"Some of it," Dorcas agrees. "The information will be useful enough."

James coughs again, louder. "Hurts," he says again. *Thump thump thump* of his fist against his hairline fracture chest, hollow and wooden as a barrel.

"We'll go home soon," Dorcas promises. It's a lie, though; it is November and it is the height and heart of the war, and she isn't sure home exists anymore. She rests her head back against James' shoulder and tries not to make it feel like affection. "We'll go home soon."

They linger there in the dark for perhaps too long.

“Nothing new,” James tells Moody, leaning against the kitchen doorframe. “A few letters from students to parents. We put them in the muggle mail. But nothing... nothing for the Order. I’m sorry.”

Dorcas is already halfway up the stairs, hands dug tightly into the pockets of her jacket. She determinedly does not look at James or Moody, just plods up towards their storage-cupboard bedroom in silence, letting James deal with this great stinking pile of horseshit he has made and is continuing to make taller.

“And you’re sure there’s nothing wrong with it?”
McGonagall asks severely, over Moody.

Dorcas can *hear* the false sheepishness in how James shakes his head; she doesn’t even have to look down at him to see him doing it. “They might be blocking external communications — through the muggle mail system — but they’re not stopping messages from inside Hogwarts. We’ve got a bit to sort through but nothing’s come up for you yet. Sorry.”

There’s a tense silence. Dorcas makes it to the top of the stairs and takes the next flight up, not stopping until she reaches her and James’ bedroom. When she gets inside, she flops down onto James’ mattress and lies there, breathing in the smell of his pillow and watching morning sunlight filter through the single small window.

James makes it upstairs a few minutes later. He closes the door behind him and collapses onto Dorcas’ mattress.

"They tested me for the imperius curse again," he mumbles into the heavy silence between them.

"I'm not surprised," Dorcas snaps. She sits up and unzips her jacket, letting dozens of unopened letters from the PO box fall out into her lap. "James, you're a maniac. I should report you. I should rat you out."

"But you won't."

"One of these days," Dorcas warns. She picks up letters by the handful and throws them at him. They land on his back. "We're killing people."

"It's a few letters."

"If you'd not opened Marlene and Mary's letters last year, they would've died in Ireland."

James is quiet for a while. Dorcas lies back down on his mattress, rolling onto her back and staring at the cracked ceiling. She aches from the mission to find Harrods a few nights ago, still burns with the lingering panic of it. The last few days (weeks, months) have been one long, quiet, humming adrenaline rush; it has settled within her and it's a part of her now, this panic.

Eventually, he says, "I sorted a few the other day."

"Oh, fuck off."

"I did!"

"A few isn't enough," Dorcas snaps.

"I know," James replies, on the edge of a cough. He hacks and hacks again, rolling onto his back, chest jittering with

it.

“Then why?!”

He coughs harder, deeper, a loud snapping thing which cracks from him like something breaking.

Dorcas sits up again and leans over to James, grabbing him by the shoulders and shaking him. “Why?!” she demands, louder.

James’ head rattles on his shoulders and his glasses slip off his face and land in his lap. Dorcas holds him there for a moment, staring into his unfocused dark eyes, trying to will something into them. Comprehension or tears or something similar. But he just looks at her, doleful and fucking pathetic.

Dorcas shoves him. James hits the wall, sitting with his legs splayed out on the mattress, back to the wallpaper. The impact judders him and he coughs again, one hand fumbling to find his glasses. He shoves them back onto his face.

“Why,” Dorcas says again, calmer now. “Can you just try to explain it to me?”

“What is there to explain?” James asks miserably. He rubs his eyes, almost dislodging his glasses again. “I’m fucking up and doing it continually.”

“But you can stop.”

“Maybe.” He shrugs.

Dorcas resists the urge to grab him and shake him again. He looks so small sitting there against the wall. She has a

rush of memory, remembers him laughing with Black in the back row of potions, hurling balls of torn-up parchment at the back of Snape's head. How they laughed and laughed together until the whole class was ruined and they had to stay behind to finish the work they hadn't been able to get done because Slughorn had been too busy telling the marauders off.

James might as well be a different person now, the cracked fissure of his sternum poking precariously out of him, shoulders drawn, neck narrow and bruised with the pressure on his throat as he breathes. He's always blue with not-enough-oxygen, especially since the fire spread close enough to London to fill the air with smoke and ash all the time.

"Tell me what's going on in your head," Dorcas begs. "Help me understand."

James stares at her. He looks abruptly like he's going to cry. "I can't," he murmurs.

"We keep lying. Why is it so hard to tell the truth?" And Dorcas says it again. "We keep lying, it's all we do. We've lied ourselves into a hole, we'll never get out of it. Soon they're going to figure us out. Why not come clean?"

"They'll kill me."

"We're not death eaters."

James shrugs.

Dorcas hates him then, hates him with an intensity that feels not at all foreign to her. "I'll tell them. I will."

“No you won’t,” James mutters. “I’m all you’ve got. You’re on your own if they kick me out.”

And it’s true. The idea of not having this — this room together, James on the other side of the mattress — of being alone, she has nightmares about it. All the time. And of course he knows that. They know far too much about each other at this point, far more than is normal or healthy. It’s been three months since Mary died but it might as well have been years.

Dorcas decides to try a different approach. She shuffles to sit beside James on the mattress, legs out in front of her parallel to his, back to the wall. James is stiff as a board beside her. They sit in silence for a while, shoulders touching.

“Can you really not explain it?” she asks eventually.

James shakes his head once, resolute, like a child. “I try to sort them and it... the thought of it makes me sick.”

“Why?”

“Dunno.”

“Then let me do it.”

“But I should be able to,” James says with force. “I should. I just *can’t*. And I don’t know why.” He rakes his nails down the tops of his arms, leaving angry red trails. “I don’t know why.”

Dorcas pries his fingernails from his skin and drops his hands back into his lap. “Don’t do that.”

“What else is there to do?”

“Your fucking job.”

James stills. “I know,” he whispers. “I know. Please stop telling me.”

When Dorcas got so soft, she doesn’t know. Maybe it was Mary. Maybe it was Marlene. She looks intently across at James for a moment and then looks away, almost afraid she’ll burn her retinas. He is going supernova, a bright white tearful dwarf star within the mess of it. She is watching the death of something distant and burning.

“I can do it with you?” she offers, and reaches across to grab one of the letters off the floor, holding it up. “Look. This one is for...”

James squints at it, held between them. “Caradoc,” he murmurs. “He’s got a relative in the school. If I remember right.”

“Yeah,” Dorcas encourages, with a mouth and tone and words that do not feel like hers. “Yeah. So that can go in a pile for Order members. And this next one?”

James takes the next letter off her, squinting at it. His eyes go unfocused and he seems to fall into his own thoughts.

Dorcas snaps her fingers in front of his face. “Who is it for?”

James flinches. “Uh. This one’s for... muggle relatives, I think, of someone at Hogwarts. A Davies family. You don’t know them?”

“Nah,” Dorcas offers. “No, I don’t. We can put it in the muggle mail.”

“Right,” James says, half zoned out.

“James.”

“Yeah?”

“Breath?” Dorcas offers.

“Oh,” James murmurs, blue in the face by this point. He hefts in a great long breath and a sharp whip-crack cough bursts from his mouth, a bit of blood with it. He curls his legs and arms up tight and sits in a ball, coughing, wheezing, taking these short shallow breaths that Dorcas thinks are probably bad news.

She has no idea how to deal with this. Gingerly, she rests a hand on James’ shoulder, rubbing slow circles there. “Hey. You’re okay.”

James shakes his head frantically. He tears his glasses off and throws them across the room, forcing his hands against his face, digging blunt-nailed fingers into his eyes, hard, too hard, reddening the skin there, harshing deep divots into the flesh of his eyelids.

“James!” Dorcas tries to pull his hands away. “James, stop it — you have to breathe—” There’s a lump in her own throat and Dorcas realises with a start that she, too, is almost sobbing. “James, please!”

He digs his nails in deeper and hefts another sharp breath, a groaning, shrieking sort of sound. “Sorry.”

“Don’t say sorry. Just breathe!” Dorcas grabs him by the face, hands over his. “Look at me. James. Look at me. Breathe. Breathe. Breathe.”

James shakes his head back and forth and back and forth again. "I can't," he moans. "I can't. I can't."

"Yes you can," Dorcas promises. "With me. Come on. In... and out..."

James tries to copy her, the air shuddering in and out of his teeth, almost whistling. In. Out. In. Out. He pulls his fingernails out of his eyelids and they're bleeding underneath in thin, deep-pressed crescent moons. He opens his eyes and a vessel has burst in the left one, making the whole sclera blood red.

"In..." Dorcas instructs. "Out... that's it..."

"I don't know what's happening to me," James mumbles, between long, rasping breaths. "I don't know why I'm doing this."

Dorcas wouldn't like to diagnose, and is probably the exact wrong person for it. She thinks it's probably something serious-sounding, though. One of those muggle illnesses with all the letters, the harsh consonant-filled ones. Something that is killing him as quickly as the snapped sternum, perhaps quicker.

"You're okay," she tells him, one of the less egregious lies she has told today. "We're okay."

"We're killing people."

She resists the urge to correct that *he's* killing people, and she has nothing to do with it. It's not true anyway. They are a double act, the two of them. Aiding and abetting. James might be the murderer, but she is helping him hide the evidence.

“Shh,” she says, instead of any of that. “Just breathe.”

James coughs again, and then again, and then again. One of his hands comes up to clutch the top of his chest, around his clavicle, and Dorcas watches him rub his palm into the discoloured skin there, as if trying to straighten his own skeleton. He pushes and pushes and there is the faint sound of bones creaking against each other; it’s so visceral that Dorcas almost gags.

“I don’t know why I’m doing this,” James hacks out again, the meaning of it different this time. “I don’t know... I don’t...”

There is a very bitter part of Marlene that would take great pleasure in informing him that of the two of them, he’s the one with the best chance of seeing the people he loves again. She’s got absent family, probably out of the country by now, and the body of Mary hanging across her shoulders, and Marlene’s ghost haunting her wherever she goes. At least his parents are already dead and out of the way; at least Remus is still alive out there. At least Black is the chosen one, too important to die, too fucking noble for it.

But saying it won’t help. And if Dorcas has become anything in the past months, it’s older, so she refrains.

“Just breathe,” she instructs. “And we’ll finish them. And then we’ll have something to show the Order. Okay? And then we can sort more tomorrow.”

She nods towards the far wall, the cabinet, behind and within which are stored bags and bags of old mail.

James looks at her like she’s just said the scariest thing in the world to him. “Tomorrow?”

“Or the day after. If you can’t handle it.”

“Of course I can handle it.” He wheezes in a tight breath. “I can’t breathe— I can’t—”

“Fuck you,” Dorcas mutters. She feels Marlene’s ghost hanging over her, urging her on; she says with a mouth not her own, “Fuck you. I hate you. Come on, breathe with me. In... out...”

In the end, they have little to show for it. A letter for Dearborn and two for Moody and McGonagall, and half a dozen for the muggle mail. There’s a letter addressed to a student’s family in Kent, in a village now evacuated from the path of the rapidly spreading fire. Wherever they’re living now, the letter won’t be reaching them. It makes the whole effort feel quite pointless.

“We’re sorting more tomorrow,” Dorcas says to James once they’re done, more threat than promise. “Understood?”

James nods, staring off into the distance tucked under the quilt on her mattress. He looks too haunted to panic.
“Yeah.”

“Hey. Look at me.”

He looks up at her. “What?”

Dorcas clears her throat. “Try not to think about it too hard. Whatever it is you’re thinking about. Remus or Lily or Black or... or something. Whatever. If you think about it you won’t be able to stop.”

James blinks at her. “Okay,” he agrees, sounding very hazy.

Dorcas pats his shoulder once. "I'll take these down to Moody."

"Yeah."

"He'll be pleased."

James clears his throat. "Yeah."

Dorcas gets up and makes her way towards the door, leaving James in a bomb's-hit-it mess of scattered paper and blankets.

"Wait," he calls after her.

She pauses, looking back. "What?"

James coughs once. "Thanks."

It is entirely inadequate. "No need," Dorcas says, waving him off. "Stay put."

Downstairs, Moody and a handful of ex-aurors are gathered around a map at the kitchen table, looking drawn and unwell under the sallow yellow overhead light. Dorcas coughs to announce her entrance and stumbles to the table, handing Moody the two letters addressed to the Order.

"Found these in the PO box," she mumbles. "James misread them at first, but they're for you."

Moody takes them from her, scanning the envelopes. The aurors sitting around him give Dorcas strange looks, like she's not supposed to be here; perhaps she's not.

"This is the first mail we've gotten in weeks," he grunts.
"It'd better be good."

"Let's hope so," Dorcas agrees, in what she hopes is a level, neutral voice. She doesn't know whether to stay while he opens them or leave. But she's been here for a few too many extra seconds. The decisions has been made for her. She leans a hip against the table and folds her arms, watching with mild interest as Moody slits a jagged thumbnail under the edge of the first envelope, cutting it open and peering inside before he pulls out the letter.

There is heavy silence as he reads, eyes flitting from the page to Dorcas and then back down every few seconds. After a few minutes, Moody puts the letter down.

"Who's it from?" Dorcas asks.

"An ally in Scotland." He narrows dark eyes at her. "Tell Potter he'd better figure out what's going on, and soon."

"Why?"

"She's been writing for weeks." Moody rubs his lower face with one hand, looking at Dorcas intently. She put that jaw together weeks ago. It feels like it's been years.

"Oh," Dorcas murmurs. "I'll tell him. He's not sure what's going on."

Moody slams a hand on the desk. "This is a war," he snaps. "I don't care what he doesn't know. Tell him to fix this, or we will!"

Dorcas stumbles back. She feels very brave around James and often forgets, as a consequence, that she is a coward around almost everybody else.

“Right,” she mutters. “Sorry.” And she turns and steps out of the kitchen and onto the stairs, jogging up them two at a time, hands prickly with tingles and the ominous rattle of dread.

DANGEROUS ANTI-MAGICAL INSURGENT ON THE LOOSE

Daily Prophet, Morning Edition, November 13th, 1977.

Ministry official and respected member of London’s magical community Nikolai Harrods has been hospitalised at St. Mungo’s Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries after an attack on Thursday night by known anti-magical agitator James Potter, leaving Harrods comatose and under medical supervision.

“It makes the world feel like it’s against us,” Harrods’ wife told *The Prophet* last night, in a press conference at the Ministry of Magic. “The streets feel unsafe with criminals like the man who hurt my husband on them. If anybody has any information, we’re begging you... for my husband, please come forward. We’re trying to make the world safer for our kind, and all we have faced is hardship for it. When does it end? When will we know peace?”

The attack occurred during one of Harrod’s watch patrols along the north end of Old Magical London. Volunteering to help his community, Harrod was beaten bloody and left to die in an alleyway, where he was found hours later by other patrolmen, on the verge of death. In the early hours of the morning, he was admitted to St. Mungo’s, where he will remain for the foreseeable future.

In a statement the morning following the attack, the Minister for Magic has reassured the public that despite the

brutality of this attack, his new legislation will not be held hostage. "If we return to derelict old magical laws," he told an interviewer for *The Prophet*, "we will be giving these anarchists what they want. We must remain strong and show solidarity and trust in these difficult times. Only then shall we prevail."

An unnamed worker at St. Mungo's has supplied additional information on Harrods' condition. "It was animalistic," they have been quoted. "Just... senseless. The attack was with a muggle baseball bat, no magic involved. The mutiny of it... it made us sick. Me and my family feel unsafe knowing figures like the attacker are still out there."

James Potter (pictured above), twenty-one, is an unregistered, unstable and dangerous criminal at large in Britain. Responsible for a plethora of other attacks on wizards and witches around the country, he is the Auror Office's highest priority criminal to capture after dangerous outlaw Sirius Black.

"Until he is captured," head Auror Grimsby has stated, "we will not rest. His anti-magic ideology, it's dangerous. Rebels and mutineers like Potter are trying to take us back to the Dark Ages. Rest assured, we will find him."

"They give him too much credit," Aves tells Dorcas over breakfast the following morning, pointing to the Prophet on the table between them. "He doesn't look his age though, does he?"

"That's because that's not his age," Dorcas replies, a bit sourly. "He's seventeen."

"Oh. That makes more sense." Aves chews on a stale muffin for a few seconds, swallowing. "*Comatose*. Give me a break.

He whacked the man with a bat a few times."

"I did most of the whacking," Dorcas puts in. "I put his face into the ground."

Aves glances up at her, appraising. "Good job."

"Thanks." Dorcas looks away. "The whole thing is a lie anyway. They didn't even see his face. Could've been anybody."

They fall into awkward silence again.

"The fire's getting mad," remarks a defected auror from down the table a few seats. He's got a bloody bandage wrapped tight around one side of his face. A magical injury that won't heal. "It's reached Crawley. A few thousand more muggles evacuated this morning."

"Their authorities don't know what's going on," Aves adds, nodding. "Think it's some freak bio-weapon something-or-other. The Russians. Little do they know, I suppose."

"It's been all over the muggle news," someone else puts in, from Dorcas' side of the table. "A few muggles with asthma have died already. Since the smoke is so potent."

Dorcas drops her hands into her lap and pulls and tugs at the edge of a nail until it comes loose, poking at the flesh of her thumb. "Are the death eaters still guarding it? Against us, I mean."

"Apparently they're going to ward it," the auror tells her. "Keep it protected so foreign wizards can't put it out. It's leverage, right? The longer it burns, the closer the muggles get to finding out about us. They get to hold it over other countries' heads."

“That’s stupid,” Dorcas says. “It’ll reach London.”

“Good for them,” Aves says. “Drives the muggles out so they can take the whole city.”

Beside her, Mullholand nods. They clear their throat.
“Cards are all in their hands right now, I suppose. Doesn’t do to dwell on it.”

“Not much else to talk about,” the auror mutters.

Dorcas stands up. “I’ve got a watch shift,” she says to nobody in particular, even though she doesn’t until tonight.

“Are you alright?” Aves asks her, raising an eyebrow. “You look...”

“I’m fine,” Dorcas assures. She pauses, raising a hand to rub at her left eye until it hurts. “I’m... I’m just stressed. That’s all.”

“I think we’re all a bit stressed right now,” Aves says, a bit snappily.

“Never said you weren’t.” Dorcas bites her lip hard enough that it makes her eyes burn. “Sorry.” She turns around and makes for the door.

Nobody stops her. They’ve all got their own shit to deal with, but it does kind of hurt, she supposes. Mostly that James was right. That they really do only have each other now.

A few nights later, a handful of Order members set off north towards Barnet, dressed in heavy dark clothing and holding their wands ready for when they have to give up stealth’s

ghost. None of Lily's potions lie in their pockets and coats this time, and they all look grim.

"I'm seventeen!" Dorcas shouts right into Dearborn's face, standing at the bottom of the stairs with her hand wrapped tight around the banister. She's in James' heavy leather jacket and she shaved her hair down again this morning. She feels armoured. She's *ready*.

"I don't care," Dearborn replies, very tiredly. "Meadowes, please. Just... get out of my hair. Just this once."

Dorcas is ten seconds from stamping her foot and saying it isn't fair. "I can fight just as well as the rest of you. I was the one that took down Harrods, if you've forgotten, this is *my* information you're working with, not James'—"

"And Potter isn't coming either, is he?" Dearborn snaps, very harried now.

One of the other Order members standing in the entrance hall, ready to leave, grabs Dearborn by the arm. "Let me."

Dorcas squints at him. "Frank, tell him I can fight. Tell him!"

Frank Longbottom sighs very heavily. He puts a hand on Dorcas' shoulder and pushes her down gently until she's sitting on the stairs. He kneels in front of her with one knee on the first step.

"I know you want to be in the thick of it right now," he says without much bite. "I know how you feel."

"Then let me go."

He shakes his head once. "It's dangerous out there. More dangerous by the day. This won't be like the raid on the train; it's not children they're guarding."

"Then what's the harm if one more person goes with you?" Dorcas demands.

Frank stares from Dorcas to the ground, and then exchanges a look with Dearborn. "We need stealth on our side."

"And?"

"And some of the jobs you've gone on have..." Frank winces. "We don't think it's the job for you."

Dorcas is sure she will either cry or start shouting. Instead of doing either, she stares at Frank hard for so long her eyes start to hurt.

"I'm sorry," he tells her awkwardly.

"You're not taking James either?" she manages eventually.

"You two are a package deal," Dearborn puts in, zipping up his dark canvas jacket. "Alright! Is everybody ready?"

There's a general murmur of assent. Frank squeezes Dorcas' shoulder in his hand and murmurs, "Sorry," before standing up.

Dorcas stays there on the step as the Order members file out, their dark-clothed backs disappearing out into the night. Dearborn is the last out of the door, and he nods at Dorcas once before he slams it shut, leaving her alone in the hallway.

“Fuck,” she whispers, mostly to herself. And then, more angrily this time, “Fuck!”

Nobody answers her; her own voice echoes in the silence. Dorcas slips off the stairs and to her feet in the hallway, peering around the kitchen door. There’s nobody in there; nobody downstairs at all, by the sound of it.

An idea forms in her mind.

Perhaps not the smartest idea. But not the stupidest thing she’s done yet either. Dorcas straightens James’ jacket on her shoulders and fumbles in the pockets, feeling for her brass knuckles, which are a cold, steady pressure against her ribs. She’s got her wand stashed in there too, the solid wooden weight of it a sort of anchor. She feels her heart speed up, pounding loud and obtrusive in her ears. Thump. Thump. Thump.

Nodding to herself once, Dorcas glances into the kitchen one more time before starting for the door.

There is a cough behind her.

Dorcas whirls around. Professor McGonagall is standing at the top of the stairs, pristine and unbothered like usual, her dark hair secured above her head in a tight bun. She looks down at Dorcas, one eyebrow raised imperiously. Dorcas looks back, a deer in the headlights.

“Going out for a walk so late?” McGonagall asks, after the ugly silence has passed. She walks down the stairs at a leisurely pace, each footstep clicking.

“Uh,” Dorcas says. And then, figuring she can’t lie her way through this one, “I... I wasn’t going to fight. I just wanted to be there in case it went wrong.”

McGonagall reaches the bottom of the stairs and walks to Dorcas' side. She watches the front door intently for a moment, before looking down at her.

"I understand your frustration," she says, heaviness to it.

Dorcas clears her throat. "I really wasn't going to fight. I swear."

McGonagall waves a hand at her. "I may no longer be your professor, but I can tell when you're lying, Miss Meadows."

Feeling herself flush, Dorcas looks away. "I'm just as good a fighter as them. I can help. I can."

"You can," McGonagall concedes. She puts her hand on Dorcas' shoulder and pats once before dropping it. "But not tonight."

"I don't care if I die," Dorcas says. She's not sure why, she just does. "I really don't."

McGonagall stares at her for a wide-eyed moment, looking caught off-guard. She opens her mouth and then closes it again, before shaking her head and looking away.

"I expect you believe that," she says, like it's simple.

"I don't just believe it," Dorcas protests. "I know it. I'm not afraid of death. Not anymore."

"You've spent too much time around Potter, I suspect."

Dorcas shakes her head furiously. "You know I want to win this war."

McGonagall offers her an appraising look. "I don't think," she sighs, and looks away. "I don't think it's about wanting anymore, Meadowes, so much as it is about needing."

"Then I need to win this war. So let me fight in it. They won't be too far away by now, I can—"

"No," McGonagall cuts in, and sounds even more exhausted. "Meadows, I appreciate your enthusiasm, but please do not test me tonight." Then, slightly stilted, "We don't need to lose you. You are still a seventh-year."

"Hogwarts is dead in the water."

McGonagall hesitates. Her eyes seem to change. "Perhaps it is," she says. "But I am still your head of house. Now, to bed with you, Meadowes."

"Or what?" Dorcas asks. "You'll keep me from going to Hogsmeade weekends?"

McGonagall blinks at her, an odd reminiscence in her face. She laughs and it's a bewildered sounding thing. "Go to bed."

"Right." Dorcas clears her throat. "Sorry, uh. Professor."

McGonagall waves her off, stepping away and disappearing into the kitchen. Dorcas watches the front door for a bit longer before sighing and starting up the stairs, which creak at every footfall, none of them quite adjoined right to the wall. They need replacing but nobody will bother.

She makes it to her and James' cupboard room and pauses outside, leaning her forehead against the door. James is silent in there, the sound of his incessant repairing spells not present for once. Maybe he, too, is tired of the

repetition of it all; of thinking that this'll be the worst it gets and then before your eyes seeing it get worse in an instant. He might be just as used to it as her. He's always saying he thinks the Old War really started in 1975, when Sirius Black first disappeared. Before the ministry takeover but even then, he says, they were waging a smaller war.

Dorcas doesn't know how much she believes that. She doesn't know how much she believes anything he says anymore.

Sighing, she opens the door and flicks the light on. It flutters on and illuminates their grubby, pressed-together mattresses, and the letters bulging out of the cabinet, too many in there for it to hold.

And James isn't in there.

"Oh," Dorcas murmurs to herself. She steps inside and closes the door behind her. The window is open, cold, ashy air breezing through. She crosses the room and closes it to keep the smog out.

She hasn't the foggiest where he is. Maybe he's snuck out too, off on the mission after Longbottom and the rest, and he was just smarter about it than her. But Dorcas knows it would take a lot for him to go out there without her. It's unlikely he built up the nerve.

Dorcas spies something on his mattress. A half written letter. She sits on his bed and picks it up.

Pads,

Writing to you the other day helped me clear my head a lot. It didn't. I promised myself I wouldn't lie to you and I've

done it already. It didn't clear my head, I'm feeling worse. A lot worse. And it's sort of scaring me.

I can't describe what it's like. I'm not ever comfortable anymore, not even for a second. This... weight, it sits on me, makes me off-kilter. I mostly want to sleep but I can't and most of the time lying down with my eyes closed doesn't help. I take a lot of showers to try to wash this horrible something-nothing feeling off. It never helps and I don't know how. I don't know how to. Get rid of it. This constant... it's like an itch. You know? This itch and it never goes away. Like my time is limited.

Dorcas is worried about me. She hates me too. I can tell. Wishes I wasn't here. As much as she's scared I'll go. I think I know how she feels, but I don't really, because I don't really know how to hate things. Not anymore, anyway. I don't know what I'm saying. She'd be lonely for a bit but.

Anyway. I guess I'm trying to say that I

It ends there.

Dorcas stares at it for a while, trying to piece it together in her head. James sitting here with the window open, breathing in the ash, coughing like he's dying. Hacking up spit over his morose letter to a dead man.

She gets a very uncomfortable feeling, all in a rush. It creeps up on her and wraps its fingers around her throat. Dorcas stands up and drops the letter onto the bed, striding across the room and out into the hallway.

Something's wrong. She knows it on an almost molecular level.

Down in the kitchen, McGonagall is sitting close to the fire, a hand raking through her tight-knotted hair as she peers down at a letter. She looks up as Dorcas enters.

"Have you seen James?" Dorcas asks, cutting to the point. "He's not in our room."

McGonagall blinks. "Unless he had the same plan as you, no, Meadowes, I haven't the faintest where he might be."

Dorcas stares. "Right. Uh. Keep an eye open for him, please?"

"Are you concerned for him?"

Yes. "No. Uh. He might have just... gone to clear his head. I dunno." Dorcas glances at the front door again, still obstinately shut. Her pulse pounds furiously in her wrist. "You're sure you didn't hear him come down the stairs or anything? He wouldn't have... he wouldn't've gone out without telling me."

McGonagall's piercing stare impales her. "Do I have reason to be concerned?" she asks, surprisingly gently.

Dorcas shakes her head once. "No. I'll... I'll find him. Sorry for bothering you."

She turns to leave, resolving herself to look upstairs again. But McGonagall calls after her.

"Meadowes," she says. "Wait a moment."

Dorcas steps back into the doorway. "Yes?"

"There's a hatch that leads to the roof," McGonagall says neutrally. "On the top floor, to the east end of the house. You

can't miss it."

"Oh," Dorcas murmurs. Her whole body goes cold.

"Thanks."

She turns and takes off up the stairs, taking them three at a time now. The stained walls flash past, lightened where they used to hold portraits, long-since taken down. The stubs of hacked-off nails leer out at her at intervals.

Get to the roof. Now.

Dorcas hurtles up the second flight of stairs and then the third, right to the top floor. In the murky darkness of the east side, she squints along the ceiling until she spies the hatch; someone has pushed an old book-filled cardboard box under it, stuffed with stolen copies of *Hogwarts: A History*.

"Oh, fuck you, James," Dorcas mutters to herself. She clambers atop the box and reaches up to push the hatch; it takes her a few tries, but eventually she manages to shove it hard enough that it swings all the way open, and the ashy night sky opens up above her, devoid of stars.

Dorcas hooks her hands over the sides of the opening and pulls herself up, scrambling to pull her knees over onto the rooftop. Once up there, she pants for a few moments, before closing the hatch behind her and straightening and looking around.

The rooftop is flat and broad, all concrete with a blocky stone chimney sticking out of the far side, pouring smoke into the sky. The city stretches low all around, her lights hazy and blurred with the hanging smoke. Ash falls from the sky like snow, thin and swirling with the dulled wind.

James is sitting on the side of the roof ten feet away, overlooking Hackney Terrace below. His legs are dangling over the side, his hands planted on the concrete ledge on either side of him.

Dorcas watches him for a while, trying to understand what he must be thinking. But in the end she doesn't understand, she doesn't think she ever will, not fully. Their traumas have affected them differently. They made Dorcas into a monster; they have made James into this rattling, empty thing.

She clears her throat. "You okay?"

James startles a bit and for a terrifying moment, Dorcas thinks he's going to slip and fall off the edge. But he keeps his grip. He looks over his shoulder at her and she sees his chest convulse with a stifled retch.

"Fine," he rasps. "Wanted some fresh air."

"The air up here is many things." Dorcas doesn't approach. She feels rooted to the spot, like she's facing down a frightened animal. "I don't think it's fresh."

James shrugs, looking back out over the city. He coughs once, then again. "I dunno."

The wind sighs around them. Dorcas shrugs the jacket off and approaches, holding it by its shoulders in both of her hands. It suddenly feels wrong to be the one with it. She gets within a few feet of James and hesitates before dropping it around his shoulders.

"Sorry I took it," she tells him, taking a seat at his side. The three-storey drop looms up towards her, nauseatingly far from up here.

He doesn't look at her. "It's fine."

Dorcas watches the city lights sway through the smoke for a while. They're bronzed by it, cast so dim it makes the world look filtered. Like no proper light may exist again inside it.

James rubs at his watering eyes. "Smoke," he says, in explanation. He coughs and then coughs again, rasping in a few quick, pragmatic breaths as if he intends to store them inside of him and hibernate with them.

"Right," Dorcas says. For effect, for the illusion, she rubs her own eyes too.

The unspoken weight of James' letter to Sirius hangs between them. Dorcas wants to mention it, and she wants not to. She wants to shake James so hard it knocks some sense into him; she wants to shake him so hard he falls off. She doesn't know what she wants. Peace. Peace and a good night's sleep. Quiet — true and proper quiet. Not illusory like it has been for months.

"I wasn't going to jump," James says after a while. He taps his heels against the wall.

Dorcas hums. "Yeah."

"Yeah."

"Yeah."

James leans against her shoulder, pressing his to hers. He rests his shaven head there, too tentative for it to mean much.

"Sorry," he murmurs. "About..." And he trails off. Perhaps meaning to say *about this* or *about me* or *about everything*.

Dorcas gets it. He's got far too much to apologise for, and most of it isn't to her.

Still. "I accept your apology," she tells him. "I read your letter."

"I guessed you had."

"You still write to him?"

He shrugs. "Sometimes. When I can."

Dorcas nods. She feels the leather of James' jacket wince against her as he shuffles a little ways back from the edge; not far enough away, but an inch or two. The drop becomes just a bit less dizzying.

"Did you tell him, then?" she asks. "In the letter. About the fire. How it was us."

James coughs. "I dunno," he says. "Don't remember."

"Right."

"I never send them anyway."

"Nobody to send them to," Dorcas agrees.

James is quiet for a while. Even the rasp of his chest seems to slow. "Are you guilty? Do you feel guilty, I mean?" he asks. Nods around at the fiendfyre smoke. "About this."

Dorcas doesn't hesitate. "Yes."

"Oh." James nods slowly. Then he looks across at her. "Me too. But you shouldn't be. It wasn't you."

Dorcas shrugs. "We're a package deal. Nobody else left, is there? We'll take the fall together."

"You think they'll figure it out?"

"Yeah."

"Me too," James agrees. "They'll figure out the mailing service soon, too."

"Is that why—" Dorcas gestures to him, his dangling legs, the precarity of it all. How James is sitting inches from having to be scraped off the pavement tomorrow morning, a fine anti-magical insurgent paste.

"I wasn't going to jump," James repeats, mostly on principle. "I'm not... I'm..."

"You're not suicidal," Dorcas prompts, like it's scripted. Like it's written.

He nods. "Yeah. 'Course not."

"Yeah."

"Yeah." James digs his chin into her. "Yeah."

Dorcas hesitates, then drops an arm around his shoulders. It feels like too much, and it's certainly far more than he's earned, throwing her life around with as much veracity as he hurls his own, hurtling each and every one of his friends headfirst into tailspinning poisonous James Potter-related frenzies from which most never recover. Brightest and most terrible thing in most rooms he exists in. She hates him for that; for being what Sirius Black left behind when he vanished, for being just like her. Lonely and wretched and stuck that way.

“You can’t come up here again,” she murmurs into his ear.

James nods, not seeming to mean it much. “We’re running out of time,” he tells her.

“That doesn’t mean you get to throw away what’s left.”

He coughs. “I won’t.”

Dorcas rests her chin on the top of his head. She breathes in the blackening ash and on the horizon, she imagines she can see the fire, burning closer by the minute. Somewhere deep inside Order HQ, an alarm goes off.

“Right,” she murmurs. “Of course you won’t. I’m not going to let you.”

Chapter End Notes

- [Official Tumblr](#)
- [Twitter Quotes Bot](#) (admin: [lupinlesbian](#))
- [Pinterest Board](#) (admin: [plantfeline](#))
- [Fic Playlist](#)
- [Podfic](#)

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THIS IS MY HOUSE AND YOU LIVE HERE

Chapter Notes

but something kept me standing by that hospital bed i should have quit but instead i took care of you a la kettering by the antlers....etc etc

twos: injury, unhealthy relationship dynamics, etc. the usual.

enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Lupin,

You have to be the unluckiest sod I've ever met. You haven't found it yet? It's been two months; I'm considering recommending you come back but Efa won't like that much so unless you want to move back to London probably keep at it, yeah? And on the topic of London, yeah, perhaps Hungary is best after all. I might be joining you out in fair Europe soon. The Saes have been up in arms about this fire in Newhaven — fiend-fire, you called it, or something? Some mad magic crap. It's spread so far people are evacuating. They reckon it'll hit London soon. Isn't your James still there?

Enough about that, though. You seem like you don't need much more bad news. I can't say much as to the question in your last letter; I've found the best technique for dealing with Efa on good days is letting her run her course. If she thinks going out there and finding this bloke will help you,

I'd trust her on that. Then again, that's asking a lot. So I get it if you're not up for it.

Either way, I appreciate you writing. Keeps life interesting. Efa reckons we might have to move soon. The dementors have been nesting closer and closer to the warren. They move up the valley further every day. The noose is closing around us, Lupin, and you're bloody lucky not to be here for it. I don't want to leave Merthyr. It's a shithole but it's mine. But I think soon we might not have a choice. You-know-who, wherever he is out there, he wants us out of the way before... whatever it is he's planning. The takeover of London. Taking over the world. I dunno what it is he wants. You wizard people are fucking bonkers.

Write back soon, mush.

- Jones.

Jones,

Sunshine as always, aren't you? I hope you're doing okay. Keep out of the way of the dementors, alright? I know they're looking for me and not you but they wouldn't miss out on an opportunity to snog you and I'd rather not return to that; I don't own any black clothes really. Nothing that would be up to

I'm getting closer. Met two wizards on the road yesterday, nice guys, travelling down from western Russia. On their way to find a new life in northern Africa, they told me, since the maniac dark lord from THEIR home displaced them. I hope they find what they're looking for; it's strange to find magical people so detached from our war. I guess they still

exist though. There are wars everywhere, like little fires. Stumbling on them has made me think quite a lot.

I'm not planning on coming back anytime soon, so don't fret about that. You're free of me for a while yet. The wizards I met told me they think they've heard of a place like the hospice before, to the north east. It's the vague direction I've been travelling, so I'm doing pretty good. I keep laying down those runes and I keep finding nothing, but one of these days I'll stumble on their wards and then it's just a matter of... walking through the front door. Reckon there'll be a receptionist to ask about it? It all feels a bit absurd.

I really am sorry things are getting worse. I know that's sort of out of turn to say. But I think about you and Efa and the rest a lot. I feel... sort of like I've left you defenceless. Which is stupid, I know, considering despite being a wizard I can't even use magic. But I guess they drill it into our heads a lot that muggles are mindless and all that. And I know you're not but that's just how the wizarding world makes you think. God, what a mean thing to put in a letter. I'm considering rewriting that but I think you told me once that you value honesty, so there you go, there it is. I think you're a stupid tosser. Not really, but.

Anyway, I'm mostly writing back to check for news from Britain. There was no 'Direct Action' this week, or last week. Why? What's going on? Is there any news from London? I know you're not the best person to ask but my only other option is mailing a friend I've got in Rostock, and I don't think we're quite at that point yet; I don't want to bother her. You, on the other hand, I am fine with bothering.

Write back as soon as you can. I'll attach my next temporary address, but I won't be there for long, so be quick!

Cheers,

Lupin.

Lupin,

If you wanted information you should've asked a wizard! I haven't a clue what's going on over the Sevens, except that it's bad. People think the endtimes are coming. Fire for miles along the coast, central London all closed off because of a 'gas explosion', is what they're saying. Nobody believes that crap, not even us stupid tosser muggles. The papers are quiet about it because the government's told em to be but most people think it's the Russians, or the Germans, if they're less bright. More people are being evacuated out of London everyday, kept in closed-down hotels along the southwest. Cornwall and that. People think they'll start sending them our way soon. What a mess. The last thing we need more of right now is English people.

I don't listen to your radio show, and you're the only magic friend I've got, so no, I don't know what's actually going on out there. I suspect it's getting ugly. Apparently the Americans are getting pissed at the slavs and it's all going to hell overseas. Efa thinks there's more war on the way (real war, not your pansy magic shit), but she's already lived through two, so I think she's a bit biased. She's always scared there'll be a third or fourth or however many more. Not in my lifetime, I always told her, but that's cos most of us don't live long.

Chin up Lupin boy! Guess we're both pretty misogyn right now. Peas in a pod. Or whatever.

- Jones.

Jones,

Reassure Efa that if anybody's going to end up caught in this war, it won't be her. That's why she's putting all this time into gaining my trust, don't think I don't know that. Once I'm back she'll let me figure out a place to relocate the pack to, she'll let me help. If not for that, what's the point of this shit?

Sorry to be so snappy. It's been a rough few days. I'm fine, before you ask, but I'm about to cut into some desolate territory in the north so I don't know what my next address will be. Don't mail me 'til I write to you again, okay? I don't know when it'll be. Hopefully when I'm at the hospice. The Korhas, or whatever. I don't remember how to spell it anymore; it's been that long. Bet you're laughing right now, you prick. I'll make it one of these days, just you wait.

If things get bad over there, don't wait for me before you move. Doing it the muggle way, without warders and the like, it'll be dangerous; I'd tell you to contact the Order, but I know you wouldn't listen. If one of you ends up dying, I apologise, but in my defence, I'm not the one who chose a trial by fire. You talk about wizards being insane.

Anyway. Stay safe. It feels weird, this being the last time I'll speak to you for a bit. Like I should say something monumental. Here's something: if they send any of the English over to stay in South Wales, you've my permission to creep down from the moors and the seam and pretend to

be a wizard and flail your arms around at them and tell them you're going to hex them. You've got a pass from your wizard friend and if anybody comes to tell you off for it, tell them Remus Lupin said it's okay.

Cheers,

Lupin.

Ózd is cold as balls, fringed by a dark patch of forest, thick with the smells of decaying industry and lavender. It sits right on the southern border of Slovakia, where Hungary tails off into more barren flats, black trees in a strip on the horizon. There's a broken down, abandoned old weapons factory on its edge from the last war. Wind whistles through abandoned houses lining all the roads, a ghostly sound, biting with ice, painful with it. Remus is uncomfortably cold more often than not, with his terrible circulation, so this is, as one can imagine, an unfortunate situation to be in.

He's running out of forints, too. Remus gets up that morning and posts his letter to Huw at the post office in the middle of town before finding a bakery and haggling with the man behind the counter for some stale bread. In broken Hungarian and English they chop back and forth for a bit before Remus makes it out of there with a hunk of slightly moulded rye bread, which he picks the spots of green off as he wanders down the road, backpack unbearably heavy between his shoulders. Some locals give him strange looks and he figures he probably warrants it. It must be uncommon to see someone so young with scars like his in a town like this.

Hungary is very grey. Ózd is no exception, a blocky row of narrow, industrial houses, terraced and stained like rotten

teeth beneath a heavy, low-hanging sky, mottled grey and brown like a bruise. The earth feels lighter than the sky most of the time, washed whitish with drought, which has made all the fields flat and pale. Every day is too dark, like the sun never properly rises, the world a half-twilit haze, never seeming to emerge from twitchy, anxious slumber.

Remus plods down the cracked concrete road leading towards the north edge of town, parallel to the border, the dark spires of the weapons factory piercing the sky ahead. The bread is a merciful fix for the aching pit of hunger in his gut, but it brings thirst with it, itching and pulling in his throat. Remus determines that he should try to find a spring somewhere — out of town, probably, because from what he's seen, the water here is probably too thick with coal dust and iron to look at, let alone drink. That, at least, feels like a small, nostalgic comfort. There's no place like home.

He wonders, not for the first time, whether now is the time to write to James. *We left him! We left Peter!* Remus remembers shouting into his face the last time he saw him. *And you left me!* James had responded, shaking with anger, and then they'd been fighting, throwing fists and grabbing at each other with clawed hands until Dorcas got in between them, almost shoving Remus off the roof.

Perhaps not the time yet. He can leave it a bit longer.

The Newhaven fire has been such big news that he's heard muggles talking about it here, all the way out in desolate Eastern Europe, mining towns and a sinking grief and, within it all, whispers of a strange wildfire burning through Britain. Whatever the death eaters' plan for it was, it's smart; it's given them reach, leverage. They have used its great blaze to expand out of themselves, some larger-than-

life thing hovering over Europe, the Dark Lord's shadow hanging black as soot over wizards and muggles alike. Remus has been thinking lately that the war will never end (he's been thinking it for months, seven months in specific), but this cements it in his mind that even if it did, nothing will ever be the same again. He feels stupid, honestly, for not having thought it before.

A bit gloomy, Remus reaches the factory, which comes into view around a tight turn in the road heading north. Beyond it lies a high iron fence, barbed wire in tight coils along the top, and then brown grass flats for miles. The block itself is a concrete square, all geometric, with blinking square windows and concave chimneys dark against the sky as they rise from the top. No smoke pours from them. It's cold and silent and conspicuous as a body, curling around the town's edge, stinking of old rust.

Gravel crunching under his feet, Remus approaches. He finishes the bread, chewing down the last grainy mouthful and swallowing not hard enough, a bit of it sticking in a lump in his throat. He coughs it down and thinks again that he needs water, and soon. It's hard to keep track of time but it's been at least a day since he last drank anything substantial, if the pounding headache and swimming nausea are anything to go by.

He makes a point of scanning the sky, just to have something to focus on. Migrating birds, heading south for winter. A flock of them dark atop the chimneys of the factory, almost small steeples, tall like a church and now succumbing to nature.

Movement in one of the windows.

Remus slows down, coming to a stop in the middle of the road. He squints up. The windows are long and wide, covering the front of the factory in blocky rectangles, they themselves bisected into small iron-sectioned squares to keep from cracking with the elements. It's hard to see past the years of grime and soot clustered against them, but then he spots it again. Someone is moving around inside.

Curiosity gets the better of him. Remus glances back at the town one last time and then starts forwards, down the road to where it turns off into an out-of-use dirt track whose gravelly expanse ends before the bolted-shut doors of the factory. Cold wind whips around him, scattering dust at his feet. Dead leaves skitter against the looming stone walls ahead.

This feels like a bad idea. But so has everything he's done recently. And perhaps... just perhaps...

Remus reaches the edge of the factory, the southern wall. He skirts up its flat grey expanse to the front doors and reaches into his backpack, past the tangle of knotted chains inside and into the very bottom, where Efa's smuggled runes sit in a pile, stolen from some wizard in Bristol. Her last gift to him before he left.

He snares one and lays it down on the ground right beside the doors, then watches it. The linen the rune is scrawled across sits still on the ground for a while, the edges blowing up in the wind. Then, it catches fire, bursting into flames, the edges curling.

Bingo.

Strange place for it, Remus thinks, this close to muggle civilization. But he's got it. He's found the hospice. He stands up and stamps out the small blaze.

The front doors don't give when he tugs on them, bolted hard from the inside, so Remus treks around to the back, through tangles of greying nettles, until he finds a torn entrance in the metal plating there, half covered in tarps. He ducks inside.

The factory has been entirely hollowed out, probably by the muggles when they abandoned it after the war. It's draughty like a lung. There's nobody on the bottom level, which is an empty metal husk, dirty windows letting in speckled brown light to lie in rectangular brands on the stone floor. The air is full of hanging dust, thick with it, enough to choke you. Someone has left a mangled curl of wires, hacked from the inside of a machine, on the floor across the space.

Nobody's been here in a while. There must be some enchantment in place to keep it looking that way, Remus thinks, each of his footsteps too loud as he stumbles through the hanging darkness, both hands wrapped tight around the straps of his bag. He starts to wonder whether he should take his gun out. Probably not very good etiquette for a hospital.

Upstairs, there is faint movement. Distant footsteps. Remus hesitates. It occurs to him that this place he has stumbled on might not be entirely friendly to strangers. Maybe that's why Efa sent him here. To get him killed and out of her hair.

On instinct, he reaches into his backpack and pulls out the revolver, spinning the chamber once, fingers itching over the trigger, not pulling back the safety yet. Gun pointed at the ground, hot in both hands, Remus pads around the empty, disquieted space, trying to find a way up. When he eventually finds a set of stairs on the north side, leading

along the far wall up to the first floor, he stares at them for a while, considering his options. Every corner is thick with cobwebs, moths flying around the windows, dozens of their small, triangular shapes stuck to the ceiling. It feels like one gunshot could shatter this place.

There is more movement. He decides he hasn't got much left to lose.

Remus reaches the stairs and starts up them one at a time, very slowly. He climbs steadily until he's a few steps from the top, which is partitioned from the factory floor by a tall concrete slab. Behind it he crouches for one, two, three seconds, before taking a deep breath and stepping up to the top step, looking right.

The main factory floor is gutted much like the storage at the bottom, her ceiling thick with exposed metal piping, an exoskeleton of scaffolding holding it up. Pillars in red and white paint prop their iron crosshatch up at intersections, scattered across the room in a grid, and those same rectangular metal-gridded windows lie across both walls, letting in faint, spotty light, which streaks across the dusty concrete floor.

There is also a person in here. Crouched against the wall across the room, not looking at Remus, in a pile of heavy canvas sheets. Makeshift blankets.

"Oh, shit," Remus says, unsure whether to drop his gun or raise it. He leaves it where it is like an idiot, pointed at his feet. "Hello?"

The stranger flinches violently, scrambling to their feet and whirling around to look at him. They've got mid-Eurasian features: light brown skin, dark hair, a Russian-looking jaw.

They fumble a hand into their pocket and whip out a wand, pointing it at him.

“Who are you?!” they demand, voice lower pitched than Remus had expected. And then, “I won’t go back. I can’t go back. I’ll kill you!”

“Hey!” Remus shouts. “No, I’m— I’m not—” He drops the gun and it clatters against the concrete.

The stranger blinks at him, then the gun. “You’re a muggle?”

“No,” Remus says. He puts his hands up. “But I can’t use magic.”

“Oh.” They hesitate, lowering their wand. “Squib?”

“No.” Remus squints, utterly confused. “What?”

The stranger raises their chin. “Who are you?”

“Who are you?” Remus demands in response. “You first.”

“You.”

“I’m the one with the gun.”

“I’m the one with the wand.”

They stand staring at each other, both unwilling to concede first.

Eventually, the stranger clears their throat. “I came down across the border yesterday,” they say, through their thick accent. “Did you?”

“The Slovakian border?” Remus asks, confused. Then, “No. Uh, I’m... from Britain.”

“...Oh.”

“I’m not hunting you,” he promises, a bit of an afterthought.

The Slovakian clears their throat. “Jana.”

“Remus.”

“On the run too?”

“Yeah,” Remus says, and then coughs. “I’m looking for a hospice. The Kórház. It’s supposed to be close to here.”

“Well,” Jana says, shoving their wand back into their pocket (far too trusting; like Remus, he supposes, looking down at the gun on the ground). “I’m trying to get to Rostock. Apparently there’s—”

“A sanctuary,” Remus interrupts. “I’ve got friends there.”

“Put in a good word for me?”

He nods. “So this isn’t... you put up the wards yourself?”

“Muggle repelling ones,” Jana nods. They squint. “And a warded human presence-detector.”

“Well.” Remus isn’t about to tell them.

They watch him for a moment. “Well.” And then, “How did you even detect the wards if you can’t use magic?”

“Brought these from home.” Remus reaches into his backpack and tosses Jana one of the cloth runes. “They

detect wards. Catch fire if they're near them. It's how I'm looking for the Kórház."

"Oh." Jana peers at the rune in their hands, turning it over between their fingers. They look back up at Remus. "You look terrible."

"So do you."

They watch each other. It is becoming more awkward than it is cautious, but Remus thinks he might be misjudging the situation.

"Sit down," Jana sighs eventually. "I've got canvas. To keep warm."

"You're sure?"

"If you wanted to kill me, you would've done it already," they reply. "And since you're probably a vampire, I don't think you're on their side."

At least they're only half right. Remus pads across the room cautiously, making the informed decision not to retrieve his gun. He sits beside them against the wall and they pass him a sheet of canvas, which Remus throws over himself, pulling off his backpack and hugging it tightly in his lap. It does a little to keep out the draught, at least.

Jana settles down beside him, wrapping themselves in a pile of canvas sheets too. "Was I right? Vampire? I've never met one before. I figured... because of the scars..."

"Sure," Remus says with ease he doesn't feel. "Why are you running?"

“Uh.” They give him a strange look over the top of the canvas, shoulders bunched up. “You haven’t heard about Slovakia?”

Remus hasn’t heard a thing about Slovakia; not through *Direct Action*, nor through anybody he’s met, or Huw. Maybe he’s just out of the loop. “Remind me?”

“They killed the magical *predsednik* last week.”

“Oh, fuck.”

Jana nods. “My parents,” they say stiffly, “have elected to stay. They don’t think the Dark Lord will hurt them. They have no idea what’s coming.”

“It’s Voldemort who killed your president?” Remus asks in a rush.

Jana looks at him like he’s slow. “Who else? It’s his territory now.”

They look away then, shuddering. Something foreign slips into their face, like they’re remembering something painful.

“They killed my friend,” they say. “The death eaters. She was... what’s the English?”

“Muggleborn?”

They laugh darkly. “Halfblood.”

Remus looks away. “It’s good you got out, then.”

“They’ll come after me,” Jana sighs. They reach beside them and pull out a canteen, handing it to Remus.

"No they won't," Remus replies, nodding his thanks. He takes a merciful sip of cold water. "They've got too much to think about. They won't hunt you down. The death eaters, I mean."

Jana doesn't look at him. "You think so?"

Remus thinks of Voldemort in the shack in Little Hangleton. How it was fear that weighed him down, fear that immobilized him. A man like that is not paying attention to small details; a man like that is frantic and crude.

"Yeah," he agrees. "You're home free now."

Jana nods once. "I can point you towards the Kórház, if you'd like," they tell him, after some time has passed. "I've been before. It's the only place of its kind near where I'm from. Close to the border. Not far from here."

"How far is not far?"

"A few days' walk."

Remus is both relieved and horrified at the prospect of walking for a few more days. He nods, knowing it's not his decision to make. "Did you have family there?"

Jana shrugs. Their face goes dark again. "There was a war before this one," they say. "And there'll be a war after it."

Remus hums and looks away, towards the windows across the factory floor. Their hazy glare seems duller by the minute. Clouds are rolling in; a storm.

"What about you?" Jana asks him. "Have you got family there?"

Remus isn't sure how to answer for a while. "I've got a job to do. For... some people back home."

"Am I allowed to ask what it is?"

"You can ask."

"What is it?"

Remus forces out a laugh. "There's something," he says. "That I'm not supposed to find."

Jana cocks their head to the side. "You vampires are crazy," they mutter. Then, "I've got a bit more water, if you've got forints to share."

"*'Share'*," Remus scoffs. More for the company than the water, he replies, "Okay."

These sorts of liminal encounters on the road, wizard-and-wizard, are rare. Remus has had only three in all the time he's been travelling, all of them friendly but none of them trusting. Most magical folks look at him and see only the scars on his face, and whether they recognise them for what they are, they often assume he's bad news. And they're right to assume it. Remus is more than just bad news: he is a whole bad media pulpit at this point. A British Broadcasting Corporation for the stranded ghosts out here who want to hear only the sad stuff. Every conversation he's had for weeks has been in the languages of war or grief, more similar each day. He emanates pessimism like it's a toxin, like one of those colourful rainforest frogs who can kill you if you touch them.

Which is perhaps what causes him and Jana to separate so quickly. They sit together in the factory until midday, Remus telling them stories about how Voldemort began, about the Old War, when his new companion decides they have to move on, unable to afford to stay at the border for long. Remus gets up and thanks them for the warmth of the canvas and the generosity of shared water. He doesn't thank them for the gift of conversation. He thinks that would be strange and out of turn. Stepping too close to something resembling trust.

"Good luck," Jana tells him as the two of them reach the road again, the factory at their backs. They're heading west, and Remus is striking further north.

Remus nods to them. "You too."

"And thanks for the money."

"Yeah. I... I promise we'll kill him. If that helps anything."

Jana peers at him. "Do you think I'm stupid?" they ask.
"Bye, Remus. It was good to meet you."

"Yeah. You too."

They nod. "Don't go to Slovakia," they tell him. "No matter what you do. It's bad out there."

"Yeah."

"Bye."

"Bye," Remus says, but Jana has already turned away, setting off down the road back through Ózd towards what might be a brighter future or, alternatively, a gruesome death three days further out there.

He watches their back until they're out of sight. Then, he continues onwards. Not much further now.

James,

~~*I met a stranger out near the border this morning. She*~~

You know, I keep trying to come up with an excuse to write to you. And I don't know why. I wasn't doing this while I was in Wales but since after the train, and since I've been out here looking for this place, some part of me always wants to write to you. I think it's because while I was in Wales, there wasn't a homesickness. Home was a bad place, lonely and cold most of the time, but I was there. Now that I'm not (and it's still lonely and cold), a bit of me wants to assign you the same meaning. Home, even if it's bad and wrong.

Are you okay out there? London's really coming under fire (~~sorry, bad joke~~), or so I've heard. Thinking of you out there is... quite upsetting. I try not to imagine it much. You've got Dorcas, and she's tough as nails even if I'm sure she hates me a bit now (what did you tell her about me? I suppose the truth would have been enough). She'll keep you safe but I don't know that she can keep you safe from the largest danger in your life, that being yourself.

I've stopped writing to Lily. Stopped hearing from her, too. I think both of us feel guilty over having kept in contact after Little Hangleton. It felt... sort of moral at the time. Like we were speaking over your head. Like you were a child. But now I feel terrible about it. And she feels the same. Worse, I think, after everything with Peter.

I dream about him a lot. Hanging out of that window. Disappearing around the corner, out of sight. I know you

don't blame Lily, and I don't either, but it's hard not to try to find SOMEONE to blame. Lately that's been myself; I'm sure I'll shift it again sometime, once it gets too heavy for me.

~~*It's the moon again soon. Do you think of me on the fulls? Do you keep track of them? I wouldn't ask you to. The last one nearly killed me. I'm scared this one will do the same. I don't know what I'm dreading more, really: finding the hospice or the full. There's a lot of stuff to dread right now. I couldn't list it all; I think trying would be a very bad idea.*~~

~~*God, I've been pessimistic lately. Not lately. For a long time. But it's been strangling me.*~~

Stay safe out there. I'm not going to send this, so I don't know why I'm writing that. Stay safe. Fuck you. I'm sorry. Et cetera. All the shit I'd like, I can say it right here.

Sorry.

- Remus.

He stumbles on the Kórház two days before the moon.

It's shit timing, in retrospect. Remus is dead on his feet, stumbling through the empty brown fields, stopping every five minutes to catch his breath. He's twice as slow as he'd normally be. He considers leaving the heavy chains behind multiple times and each time he convinces himself out of it. It would do more harm than good in the long run. He's going to ache tomorrow though, one big torn muscle of a person.

When he feels his ears pop, he freezes up and then drops (mostly without intent) to his knees.

“Fuck,” Remus murmurs. He yanks the backpack into his lap, fumbling the cold zip open. The grass ripples with wind around his knees; he pries his fingers past the chains inside, yanking them apart with an almost mad fervour, their cold hard bite pressing around his arm, until his fingers brush the canvas bottom of the bag, where he tugs out one of the last rune cloths he’s got left and throws it to the ground, staring at it intently.

Come on. Come on.

It sits on the dry grass, fluttering a little. An ant crawls up the side of it, along the dark slashes of ink, almost in the shape of an anatomical heart.

Then, it catches fire. Smoke curdles into the darkening sky.

“Oh fuck,” Remus says, standing up. He crushes the blaze with his foot and looks around desperately. Behind him, the dry grass slopes down the way he came, fields stretching for miles into the distance. Ahead it peaks upwards in a low null.

Throwing his bag back across his bruised shoulders, Remus sets off uphill, hobbling a strange half-jog to the very top. He staggers over the grassy ridge, and below, lavender trails in a purpling river through uneven brown-green fields, shoved together like puzzle pieces that don’t fit.

There is a tall, stately red-brick building in the distance, where the hills slope down to meet a rippling creek, greyish silver through the grass as it reflects the dull sky. Reeds rise high around it, wafting gently. It’s got to be four or five storeys tall, converted from an old muggle house, ten or so windows wide, with a dark roof and white tailoring. Stolen, like most magical things out here, from muggles.

Remus knows it in his gut then that this is what he's looking for.

He takes off running down the steep slope, skidding his heels forwards into the grass and mud, frantic and filling up quick with what is probably mild hysteria. Remus throws his arms out to either side to steady him, so he doesn't go toppling head over heels, and runs in stuttering and lengthening and then bounding strides, the green earth flying out from under him, scattering chunks of mud, dirt and dust beneath his feet that go rolling down the hill in front of him.

The ground levels out; Remus sprints across a long, grassy plane and leaps over a winding trail of lavender and foxgloves, the smell of them thick and alkaline as he darts through it. His bag pounds a steady, painful rhythm into the small of his back, chafing around his shoulders, and the hum of ensuing adrenaline roars to a frenzied pitch in his ears.

The creek grows nearer, wider on closer inspection than Remus had anticipated. He staggers to a stop before it and then says to hell with it and goes crashing through the tumbling waters, sending it splashing across the dried-out banks. Butterflies rise from a shadowed blossoming hideaway beneath an overhanging hunk of dirt, around Remus, up and up into the grey sky.

By the time Remus reaches the front doors, he feels less like a person than a wild, feral entity. An underfed cat appearing at a stranger's house, scratching at the letterbox. He tries to brush a bit of grass and dirt off his boots and then steps from the flats up onto the heavy stone entryway to the hospice. There's a warm feeling to the

magic here. Calm, mournful, settled. Like something that's been here far longer than it has been.

He reaches the doors, two heavy oak things, and pushes at one tentatively. They both react to his touch, sliding with a ghostly heaviness open, pushed by unseen forces. Then, Remus is staring in at the strange, rugged inside of the Kórház.

It's jumbled, a frantic sort of calmness. There is no desk, let alone a receptionist; the front room has a high ceiling and broad, off-white walls, the dull pastel of late eighteenth century decor left to go pale and washed-out with time. The room is scattered with gatherings of summoning-soft chairs and tables, sofas around small fires, beds. Huddles of families sit and lie clustered together in small groups as far as the eye can see, sallow-faced and with hungry, tired looks to them. It looks far more like a hospital than a hospice. Everybody here looks like they're clinging to life with both teeth lodged deep inside of it.

A witch bustles to Remus from nearby, abandoning a cart she had been pushing stuffed with potions bottles, most of them empty. She has a kind but stern face, hijab tucked into the shoulders of her blue-checkered apron.

"We thought we heard the wards go off," she tells Remus cheerily. "Always happy to see a new face. Now, should we find you a bed? I think you're in need of a pepper-up potion —"

"Excuse me?" Remus asks weakly.

The witch blinks at him. "I didn't mean to presume— you're here to see family, then? I'd thought you were Slovakian. We've taken in quite a few refugees, as you can see." She gestures around the room with one hand, tucking her shirt

into her trousers with the other. "And others, of course. It's become quite crowded."

"Taken in...?" Remus clears his throat. "I didn't know you were anything other than a hospice."

"Usually we're not," the woman agrees, with a heavy sigh. She's got a very conversational air, like a nurse or a teacher. Calm and cheery. "But things have been changing out there, and if there's a time to start extending a hand to our wizarding siblings — those not dying — I suppose it's now."

Remus blinks at her. "You sound British."

She stares back at him. "Oh. You, too?"

"Hogwarts. Uh." Remus looks at his feet, then back up. "Wales, originally."

"Right. Hogwarts too," she assents. "But of course, it's not safe for the likes of us anymore." She gestures to Remus, up and down. Probably assuming he's a muggleborn or something.

Remus lowers his voice and leans in a bit. "I'm, uh," he says, feeling duplicitous. "I'm with the Order of the Phoenix. I'm here to meet with somebody."

The woman stares at him. For a moment, Remus thinks she's going to laugh at him. Or worse, pity him for thinking it. But instead, she watches him with wide eyes and then draws herself up tall, looking very somber.

"Of course," she says. "What can I do to help?"

"I'm here to find a man." Remus unzips his jacket and fumbles around in the inside pocket. The padlock he uses for the chains on moons, a stick of gum, a switchblade, a few coins, unsent letters. His fingers close around the slip of paper Efa gave him that September evening and he pulls it out. "Franc Kovaèiè." And he shows her.

The witch squints at the paper, and then looks up at Remus, chewing her lip quite forlornly. "Quite a lot of people come by looking for him," she says quietly.

"I understand that it's against your policy, but—"

"It's not that," she cuts in.

Remus blinks. "Then what?"

"He's dead. He's been dead for two years now."

The penny drops and it all makes a lot of sense then. A test indeed, Remus thinks. And he's passed it. His ears fill with faint, distant buzzing. A swarm of insects. He thinks he'd like to sit down.

"Oh," he murmurs, more to himself than her.

"I'm sorry."

Remus shakes himself. "I'd expect you do get a lot of people looking for him." He hesitates. "How did he die?"

The witch cocks her head to the side. "Cancer," she tells him. "Rare for our kind."

And rarer for werewolves. "Yeah," Remus mutters. "Yeah. Sorry. Can I... sit down?"

"Of course," the woman says gently. She takes Remus' shoulder and leads him to a sofa nearby, ten feet or so from a family by a window. Remus sits down heavily, pulling his backpack into his lap and hugging it, feeling rather like a child.

"Thanks," he mutters.

"Don't worry at all." She rubs the top of his shoulder, then retracts her hand. "If you need any help, ask for Aafreen, alright?"

Remus forces a smile, not looking up at her. "Thanks," he says again.

Aafreen steps away, her light footsteps padding back to the cart. Remus hears it rattle as she pushes it across the room. Then it's just him alone, staring down at the brown patterned sofa underneath him, pockmarked with age and small embroideries. Little gem colours. He breathes in the thick, half-medicinal smell in here. It's magical, like a potions dungeon, but only a bit. Mostly it's badly-covered blood smell, and the quiet stench of death. It feels less welcoming now, knowing the thing Remus came for was dead from the very beginning.

"Fuck," he murmurs. Then he puts his face in his hands. "Oh, fuck."

There's a small cough from nearby, the sofa perpendicular to his. Remus hadn't looked at it before. "Uh... Remus?"

He glances up. There's a stranger sitting across from him, folded into the mismatched sofa cushions with her arms around her stomach. Her dark skin is thick with spots and worry-lines and she's got the tireddest, most bloodshot eyes

Remus has ever seen on anyone. She looks on the verge of death, wizened and weak.

"Uh," Remus says. "Sorry, do I know you?"

She stares at him hard for a moment, as if willing him to understand. "Guess not," she murmurs, and then turns her face a bit towards him, though it seems to hurt her neck to do so.

And then it hits Remus. "Mary?"

"Hi." She smiles faintly.

Remus stares, unable to comprehend it. "You died." *And you look dead. Are you a zombie?*

She shrugs very slightly, wincing with it. Each of her movements is stiff and slow, like they all hurt to move through. "Yeah," she agrees. "Almost. It's... sort of a long story."

"What happened?!"

Mary glances left and right, as if to check whether anybody's looking at them. "Sit... sit beside me?" she asks, raspy.

Remus stands up, letting his bag drop to the floor. The chains clink once they hit it. He stumbles to Mary's side and sits close to her. Not close enough that their knees touch, because he's scared he might break her.

"Lift up the bottom of my shirt," she instructs, letting her arms fall to her sides, face screwing up with the motion.

Remus blinks. "Are you—"

"Yes, I'm sure," she snaps.

Remus winces. He reaches to the bottom of Mary's shirt, dark enough a shade of brown that he can't tell whether she's bled on it, and lifts it.

There's a flat expanse of bandages underneath, wrapping in a half-foot wide trench around her midriff. And a dark fuzzed-out stain sits right in the centre, bled outwards from an unseen wound. Blood but... wrong. Too watery, too black.

"What is this...?" Remus murmurs.

Mary coughs. "The kettering curse," she hacks, throat convulsing. Remus sees now that against her brown skin, black veins like blood poisoning snake up her neck, strangler vines. "That night in London."

Remus has heard of it. The kettering curse was all over *Direct Action* when it came about after Little Hangleton, and he's heard horror stories. People talk about it like it's a plague more than a piece of dark magic.

"How did you end up—" He gestures around. "Here?"

Mary stares at him like she's trying to figure out the best way to respond. "I..."

"What is it?"

She hesitates still. "I don't know if I should... it's..."

Remus lets her shirt go, dropping it back over her split-open stomach. "Please?" he asks. He doesn't think he can put up with any more secrets or any more lies. He might just explode, too many of them living inside of him to cope with.

Mary stares at him, eyes sunken into her face. Every time she stops moving Remus is scared she's just died on the spot; she looks close enough to it, skin hanging, hair missing from her scalp in clumps. Her dark pupils are pale in the centres, like they've gone blind. She feels not fully here, like an old person with a failing memory; the sort of person you sit with for hours feeling completely alone.

"I was rescued," she says eventually. "By an ally of the Order. He took me to Iceland... I would've died in a couple of days if I didn't have his help."

Remus stares, trying to figure out what she's thinking. "So you're staying in Iceland?"

"For the most part."

"Then why are you here? You're not—" Remus hesitates. "You're not dying, are you?"

Mary peers at him like he's crazy. She shakes her head. "I..." And her eyes fill up with tears. She tries to raise a weak hand to wipe at them but can't get it all the way up.

"Oh no," Remus murmurs. "Hey... listen, I'm sorry..." He leans forward to wipe her face gently with his sleeve, worried it'll tear like tissue paper.

"It's okay," she sobs. "Well. It's not okay."

"You're here as a patient then?"

Mary shakes her head. "No," she says, sort of angrily. She's frustrated, Remus can tell, with her own body. Half-mummified and unable to choose how to move. "No," she repeats. "No. They said I would be admitted, but I don't want to die here."

“Then you’re here for treatment?”

“There’s no saving me.”

“But surely they can help—”

“Remus,” Mary murmurs. “Remus, please don’t.”

Remus swallows harshly, around a very big lump in his throat. “Dorcas thinks you’re dead,” he whispers. “James, too.”

“I...” Mary’s face changes a bit. “I wrote to them. A couple of times. They never wrote back, but... I’d assumed...”

“No.” Remus shakes his head. “No, they still think...” He cuts himself off. No need to say it, to make it real.

“Maybe it’s for the best.” Mary slumps back further into the pillows. They loom around her, an early grave. “I’ll be dead soon anyway. That’s what—” She stops herself.

“What?” Remus asks.

She considers him for a moment. Her pale eyes, as dead and unfocused as they are, still take in every inch of his face, as if scanning for a fault line. Remus can tell she’s thinking very hard.

“Do you trust me?” Mary asks eventually.

“Yes,” Remus replies, not knowing that he’s telling the truth.

“Okay.” She clears her throat. “You’re going to have to help me get upstairs.”

Getting Mary to the third floor proves challenging. There are magical lifts to keep patients from having to walk up and down stairs if they're unable, but even getting her out of the sofa cushions and to her feet, mostly carrying her, is difficult. Every movement seems to make her jostle and stiffen with pain, each breath making her groan. She's more fragile slung over Remus' shoulders than any human he's ever held before, a broken bird.

"I don't want you to feel sorry for me," she murmurs to him as they hobble together off the lift, a few floors up. It's airy up here, a light, ambient temperature. The corridors are very wide. "Okay?"

Remus tightens his grip on her a bit, feeling her ribs shudder beneath his hand. "Of course."

"I mean it."

"I do too."

She huffs, then grunts as she lists particularly heavily against Remus. "Oh, god, I should have just told you the room number," she mumbles into his shoulder.

Remus forces a laugh that he cannot truly feel. It vibrates around inside of him. "Sorry. We're close now. Right ahead. 311."

"Yeah." One of Mary's ankles jerks the wrong way and then the other, and both of her knees give; Remus catches her under the arms and she lets out a short scream of pain.

"Sorry!" he shouts. "Sorry, oh Merlin. Come on. I've got you."

How they make it the rest of the way to the room three-hundred and eleven is a mystery. Remus kicks open the door and hauls Mary inside, dropping her in a chair beside the bed and then turning to look at who's in it.

Another stranger. This time he squints at it, just to make sure it isn't secretly a dead friend. But he's sure he doesn't know this woman. Fifty or sixty, with short, iron-grey hair and a broad face. Dead to the world, mouth slightly open. A magical heart monitor beeps beside her, strange and discordant; Remus hates its sound.

And he turns fully and the world sort of dies. It all goes away.

Sirius is sitting on the other side of the bed, looking up at him. His hair is longer still than it was the last time Remus saw him, and he looks about as undead as Mary. He doesn't even look surprised. Just resigned. Like he's looking into the face of inevitability.

"Hey, Moons," he says. "Uh."

Remus stares at him. Then, he turns and walks out of the room.

He makes it three steps down the hallway before stopping, turning around and walking back in.

"Sirius," he says. "What. Why."

None of those words are questions. They feel more like weapons. Remus hopes they hurt.

Sirius just watches him, eyes very large. One of his hands is holding the old woman by the wrist. Remus watches his grip tighten there.

“Sirius,” Remus repeats. He takes a few steps back and then a few more forwards, until he’s standing right at the foot of the bed. He wraps a hand around the bottom railing very tightly.

“Moons,” Sirius says. He coughs. “Moony. Remus.”

Mary, looking much like she wants to disappear, speaks up. “If you two want some privacy, I can stay with Galina—”

Galina. Remus recognises her then. The woman from Little Hangleton.

“We’re not going anywhere,” he snaps. Then, directly to Sirius. “I’m not going anywhere with you.”

Sirius raises his hand, letting go of Galina’s wrist for a moment. As if to protect himself, maybe. “I’m sorry,” he says.

“What for?”

“I don’t know.” Sirius hesitates. “A lot of things. You know that.”

“Tell me them,” Remus demands. And before Sirius can speak, “No. Don’t tell me.”

“Remus—”

“Don’t call me Remus!” Remus snaps.

Sirius’ face rumples up. For a moment Remus thinks he’s going to cry. Then, he seems to try very hard to compose himself. “What... what would you like to be called?” he asks gently.

Remus stares. “What?”

"I can call you whatever."

"You don't get to do this. This—" Remus waves a hand around for emphasis. "This. You don't get to do that."

"I know."

"You don't know!"

Sirius stands up abruptly. "Remus— Moony—"

Remus staggers backwards, around the side of the bed to Mary, so he and Sirius are standing on either side of it. "You — look at you. Look at you! Standing there like it's nothing, hiding away in some fucking hospice— you're not even dying! Hiding away here, and do you know how many nights I dreamed you were dead? Do you know?! Can you even hope to know that—"

"Please don't yell at me," Sirius says in a very strangled voice. "Not you."

"Why not?!" Remus demands. He's throwing his arms around and spitting and he wishes he had his wand, wishes he could use it. He could hex Sirius right out of the window, right out of the country to Slovakia or Iceland or Britain. Wherever. It doesn't matter anymore.

"Not you," Sirius pleads again. He reaches one hand, the left one, out to touch Remus, fingers faltering halfway between them and then falling back to his side. "I can't handle it if it's you."

"Great," Remus snorts, nastily, angrily, toxicity and poison in it. He feels full up with coal dust, lungs thick with smoke. He feels dangerous. "So James could do it, but I can't get angry with you. You're always like this. I could never get angry

with you then, either, even if you were dying— I told you so many times, I told you— and you didn't listen, and I was right. I was right. And you didn't listen to me."

"Please don't—"

"What else am I supposed to do?!" Remus demands. He grabs Sirius by the front of his shirt and shakes him. "Look at you, look at us! It's been a year and a half Rosier, and you didn't come back. And I saw you and then you left again. James is a wreck, he's going to get himself killed and it's all because of you, and Lily left because she couldn't put up with the ghost of you living in that apartment, and look at me!" He shakes Sirius again. "Look at me!"

Sirius stares at him. One of his hands comes up to hold Remus' wrist. Not trying to pull it off. Just holding it. Remus realises that he's shaking and lets him go, pulling his hand away.

"Why are you here?" Sirius asks after a moment.

"You want me to leave again?"

"No!" Sirius startles. "No. That's not... no. I just..."

Remus swallows hard. That lump in his throat won't stop coming back. "I was here for a job. I'm with a pack in Wales now."

Sirius watches him. "Without James."

"You cannot lecture me about—"

"I wasn't going to!"

“You left first!” Remus spits. “You left first, you can’t— you can’t—” He rubs his face with both hands. “He never even saw you cry. Didn’t know anything was wrong. Do you know what it was like?! All of fifth year, running around keeping him sane, stopping him skipping every class and decaying in his bed?! Do you have any idea what it was like to watch him *kill himself* over you?! You don’t know, you can’t know —”

White in the face, Sirius gawps at him. He looks like he’s going to be sick.

But Remus isn’t done. “Not one letter to us, not a fucking word, even after Rosier, even after the war started. Nothing. Lying next to him, knowing he only wanted me there because he missed you— I’m not stupid, Sirius, I can see when history is repeating itself. And it’s you, it’s all you. It was always you. It always comes back to you. And this whole time, you’ve been— fucking— fucking— fucking, eating skyr in Iceland?!”

“It’s more complicated than that,” Sirius murmurs. “Remus, I’m sorry. I’m sorry. Please don’t shout.”

“I CAN’T HELP IT!” Remus cries. “I can’t help shouting, I can’t not be angry anymore— I can’t stop—” He picks up the heart monitor by its iron rail and hurls it into the wall. The top shatters, coming apart into intricate metal pieces. It beeps once, a long flatline as the wire comes loose. Then, disembodied, it starts up again. *Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep.*

“Remus,” Sirius is saying, voice cracking. “Remus. Remus.” As if he just wants to feel Remus’ name on his tongue.

Remus rounds on him. He needs something else; he throws his backpack off his shoulders and it crunches and clatters to the floor, a heavy metallic noise. He crosses the room to

the window and picks up a vase of half-dead flowers, hurtling it past Sirius and into the wall, where it shatters. He finds an empty chair and kicks it three times, four times. Five times.

“Fuck!” he shouts. And he turns back to Sirius. “Two years! More than two years! And you saw me once and you— you —” He points, feeling like a mad person, points and points and jabs his finger at Sirius across the woman’s body until he’s stabbing at the middle of his chest over and over. “You went again. I would have stayed if you stayed. I would’ve gone anywhere. Anywhere. I would’ve come with you if you asked me to, I would have done anything, I still would.” And he sobs. “I still would.”

Sirius grabs one of his hands, holding Remus’ wrist. “What happened?” he murmurs, running a thumb over the bruising there, which sticks out thick and swollen even after weeks.

Remus wants desperately to pull his hand away, to reel it back and punch Sirius, hurt him, hurt something. Anything. But he can’t take his hand away, he can’t, not with Sirius rubbing the gentle pad of his thumb over the cold skin.

“The moon,” he says quietly, the steam out of him. “The last moon.”

Sirius glances from Remus’ wrist to his face, and then spies his bag. “Chains? Remus—”

“Don’t.”

“You shouldn’t have— what mission could be that important —”

“Apparently not this one,” Remus replies, with no small amount of bitterness. “It was a dead end. Deliberately. The wolves, they wanted to know they could trust me. See if I’d come this far for them.”

“And it was for nothing?” Sirius asks.

Remus shrugs. “I think,” he says stallingly. “I think they wanted me to learn.”

Sirius’ face changes, something indescribable in it; Remus can’t figure out what he’s thinking, what he’s feeling. He looks from Remus to the dying woman. Galina.

“Yeah,” he murmurs. “I guess. Watch and learn.”

Remus squints at him. He pulls his hand away and turns and walks out of the room.

He makes it five steps this time before coming to a stop, standing still. Grey daylight casts dull shadows across the wall. Remus watches them for a few seconds before turning and striding right back into the room.

Sirius is still standing beside the bed. Remus moves to stand over the other side and the great wall of it sits between them, as safe as it is painful. The woman still hasn’t woken. Remus glances down into her grey face and wonders whether to ask if she’s even still alive.

“If it means anything to you,” Sirius starts. “I wrote you letters.”

Remus looks up at him. “You did?”

Sirius nods. He reaches into his jacket and pulls out a wad of them, all stuffed into a single envelope.

Remus stares. Then he turns around and kneels beside his backpack, unzipping it. He uncoils feet of metal chains onto the floor, the conspicuous clanking of them the only sound in the world besides the rasp of Mary's slow breathing. Pieces of cloth runes scatter out across the tiles. Then, he pulls out the wine box, flat and splintery.

"Me too," he tells Sirius as he stands up and pulls the lid off it. Hundreds — maybe thousands — of letters inside, and Remus dumps them all out onto the floor in their masses, too many to count, some of them enveloped but most of them loose. Pages and pages and pages of his narrow, slanting scrawl. Two years of them.

Sirius watches, saying nothing. Remus drops the wine box and it clatters against the floor. He returns to the bedside, studying Sirius' face.

"I wrote too," he repeats, softer and angrier. "Every day."

"Remus—"

"I wrote to you every day. I never stopped. And I couldn't stop if I tried. I don't think I ever will. No matter how many times you leave. It makes me hate you— I hate you—"

Sirius sniffs hard. His eyes aren't wet but he looks close to it. "Remus..."

"I told you not to call me that."

"I have to call you something!" Sirius snaps. He shoves the letters — his letters — at Remus. "I couldn't write for long. A few months and I—" He holds up his limp right arm, dead and blackened. "It's a long story."

"And I don't want to hear it," Remus snaps, even though he does, he does, he knows he would sit and listen to Sirius tell stories for years if he could.

"I know," Sirius agrees. He ducks his head.

They stand like that for an ugly stretch of quiet. Outside, the grey sky has darkened still, black clouds rolling in across the horizon in crowded clumps. Mary says nothing. Remus can feel her staring.

"I'm sorry," Sirius says again.

"Don't say that."

He nods. "I won't."

Remus chews his lip, trying to figure out what to say. He bites at it until it hurts and then wraps his teeth around his thumbnail and pulls until it goes ragged and rough at the tip, half shorn.

"I can't stop wishing," Remus says eventually. "Trying to find places it could've been better. Bits where we could've done it different."

Sirius looks at him, saying nothing. God, he looks tired. Tired like he's been holding up the world.

"Bits we could've done differently," Remus repeats. "And I always come back to one day."

"Last day of term. '75."

"Yeah."

Sirius looks away out of the window, like he would very much like to jump from it.

"I'm right," Remus says into the quiet. "It would have to be that day. Any other time and I don't think you could've been saved. But if you'd said yes and come back with me I'd've taken you anywhere. Gone with you anywhere. We could have gone on the run. I don't care how far. And James would've come too."

"But we wouldn't have done that to him."

"Loneliness would kill him faster than we ever could," Remus rebukes.

Sirius looks back at him. "Then we've both fucked up."

It's Remus' turn to stare out of the window. "You should've come back with me," he whispers. "Come home with me. Some bit of me knew it'd be the last time I saw you for a while then. You know? I think a bit of me knew."

"I'm sorry you had to live with that."

"I've lived with worse," Remus lies. And he wants to cry again. He is almost crying again. He can feel it in the back of his mouth. "Your shoulder. What's on your shoulder?"

Sirius glances down. He tugs aside the neckline of his shirt.

"That one's for you," he murmurs, pointing to the sharp hunk of broken glass. "And that one's Jamie."

Sirius still calls him Jamie. Remus' heart hurts, a sort of pain he's never been able to make sense of. Something he knows will never properly leave again; a permanent something.

"Yeah," Remus says into the mourning quiet. "It would've had to be that day."

They were standing on either side of a bed then, too. The déjà vu is killer.

"I'm so sorry," Sirius murmurs again. Like he's stuck on loop.

"Stop it."

"Sorry."

"Stop!" Remus shouts. He grabs Sirius by the front of the shirt again, pulls it back. All the knives across his shoulders and arms glare up at him, dark and sharp; he sees them all. "Look at you! Making knives out of your friends, putting me on your shoulder like I asked to be there—"

"Remus—"

"I didn't ask you because I've never been able to ask you for anything!" Remus shakes him and pulls him closer and closer until they're breathing the same air, both bashing their knees against the bedside. "I've never asked you to want me or to mourn me, or to kill me, and you're doing all of them. I hate you, from the bottom of my heart I hate you. I hate you."

Sirius' eyes are finally wet, going bloody-edged. Good. Let him fucking cry. "Remus," he says again. His hand finds Remus' wrist again, wrapping around it. "Remus, please—"

Remus doesn't know what Sirius is pleading for and he doesn't care, he doesn't care, he doesn't care. He presses them closer until their foreheads are knocking together between them.

"I hate you," he says again, and chokes out the last bit, "but I can't leave. You're ruining me but I can't leave—" He

gestures up and down himself, at his body. His chest and his legs and his throat. "This is my house and you live here, and I didn't invite you, but you live here. And you won't leave. And you never will."

Sirius' working hand grapples its way around to the back of Remus' neck. "I'm so sorry," he gasps out, like he's drowning. "I wish I'd gone with you. And if I could do it again I would."

Remus breathes in and then out, Sirius' clavicle a cold hard press against his knuckles. "Kiss me please," he murmurs.

Sirius pushes him in and kisses him with hunger, sort of sobbing now. Remus expects it to taste like something new, something different from James, but it feels like a process he knows intimately, like a well-loved recipe, like a Monday morning; it feels like the apartment in Lambeth, like lying in the sun with James back in Wales. It tastes like London smells. There is nothing unfamiliar about it; the way Sirius' lips feel, the warmth of his breath as he exhales through his nose, breath ghosting across Remus' upper lip.

It doesn't feel like kissing Sirius. It doesn't feel like kissing James. It feels like coming home.

Sirius pulls away. He looks down at Galina, and then up at Remus, and he says, "I'm not running anymore. I promise."

Remus pushes his forehead against Sirius', butting their heads together, desperate to stay in the same space. To breathe in the same air.

"I know," he murmurs. "I won't let you." And he looks up into Sirius' startling grey eyes. "We are not going to let Mary die."

Chapter End Notes

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ARCHEMBEAU

Chapter Notes

so. uhh.

been a little bit! i know a week isn't long but it's long for me. im really sorry about that. this chapter was a fucking menace, probably the hardest one to write yet, and im going to go on record to say i am really, sincerely unhappy with the finished product. i think it's convoluted and a bit flat and wordy and weird.

so prepare yourself to perhaps not enjoy this one a whole lot. sorry that sounded so weird. be gentle with me in the comments<3 i promise the next one is way more interesting. and should be up way sooner!

warnings for light gore trauma injury.

enjoy! (moderately)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“I got you parma violets,” Clara greets, tossing the tube of them into Lily’s lap. “Just like you said.”

“Shh,” Lily tells her, and gestures Clara closer across the moonlit overhang. “Come here.”

Clara sinks down beside her, knees pressing warm against Lily’s. She peers through the stone banisters along the edge of the balcony. After a moment, she leans close and whispers, “What are we looking at?”

“We’re listening,” Lily breathes in reply. “There.” She gestures to the open window a few feet below, to their left. Golden light spills from inside, and the sound of faint voices. “The leaders are meeting.”

“Oh. That’s tonight?”

“They knew people would try to listen in,” Lily tells her. “So they said it would be tomorrow. But I figured it out.”

Clara gives her an impressed look, then leans against the banisters, ear pressed out against the night, listening along with her. Lily twists the tube of parma violets in her lap and strains to catch the thread of the conversation inside.

“...I maintain that putting all our eggs in one basket,” one of the leaders is saying, “is a terrible, foolish idea. It’s ridiculous. This is a stranger — none of us have even met him—”

“Them,” someone cuts in.

“*Them*,” the first corrects, sounding very annoyed now. “Though I think we pay them enough not to complain.”

There’s the sound of someone — Neumann, Lily thinks — clearing his throat. The hubbub inside dies down.

“I appreciate the concern,” he says tiredly. “But the deal has been made. There’s nothing to be done about it now. We have made our decision and we must make the best of it.”

Someone shouts something angry in German. Lily looks askance at Clara.

“They’re worried about money,” Clara murmurs to her.
“They said we’re out of it.”

Lily looks back at the window. They’re at the wrong angle to see inside, but she can see shadows flutter across the inner window pane, like people are pacing around or waving their hands in there.

“What was the alternative?!” someone is demanding.
“Letting those two-dozen die? And more to come, surely, once the other side realises we’ve no way to cure them. It’ll be their calling card. Especially with the Magische Regierung refusing to outlaw its use— it’s practically a legal killing curse— and with the state of the British Ministry—”

“Britain might as well not exist anymore,” another snaps.
“For all they’ve done for us. It’s the Order’s fault we’re in this mess to begin with.”

“It’s nobody’s fault but the *fasciste*, if we divide the resistance we lose the only strength we have!”

“Write them a letter about it, see if they respond!”

“*Ruhig sein!*” Neumann shouts, surprisingly sharply.
“*Haltet mal alle eure scheiß Fressen!* Tyrell is right. We’re not allowing anybody to die — choosing who lives, who we’re willing to sacrifice, it goes entirely against our ideology. We built this place to save lives. Not to divide troops into sacrifices and soldiers.”

“You are dooming us, Karlheinz,” someone snaps. There’s the heavy crack of a fist slamming into the tabletop.
“Destroying us. You’re an old fool, rotted and wizened by age — the wars have decayed your mind.”

There are murmurs and shouts. Mostly outraged, but some of them sound like they're in agreement.

Neumann is quiet for a while. "If you truly believe that," he says eventually, "I would ask only that you remain until we have determined whether the *gegraben* live or die. If you are correct, I'll step down myself."

"No!" someone calls.

Lily and Clara exchange grim looks in the darkness. Clara reaches out to grab her hand, squeezing it very tightly, mostly to comfort herself. Lily squeezes back, shifting a little on her haunches to stay upright against the cold banister.

"If this works," someone calls, "you should step down anyway. It's too large a risk — the return doesn't matter. We've lost too much either way."

"Like you can talk," someone calls in reply. "What is it that's going on in Slovakia right now? And you're here instead of helping your own people—"

"None of us have a *people* anymore! This is us versus the occupation, it is *not* about nationality, you hypocrite! You should be back in Britain then, if you look at it that way!"

"There isn't a Britain left to go back to!"

"We're getting off-topic," someone else calls, sounding very irritated. "Britain has less than nothing to do with this."

There is angry squabbling in German, and then another loud crack. Violence is brimming in there, hot and loud. Lily feels taut with it, alive with it. She feels wide awake. She looks away from the gold-lit window into Clara's scared

face, and then out past her, towards the trees lining the edge of the sanctuary's territory. There appears to be no movement out there, but it's too dark to see properly.

"Forgive me," the Slovakian wizard spits. "For thinking we might want to consider cutting our losses. Bleeding hearts don't keep warships floating. We all know that by now."

"If we willfully let dozens die, we hand the death eaters a weapon powerful enough to incapacitate us."

"They already have one — money. Another — time. Resources. Power. Political control. We need to think bigger than individual people, the war is becoming too large for that."

"Tell that to the kids dying in the *graben* ward!"

There's a knocking sound and everyone in the room goes deadly silent; you could hear a pin drop.

After a moment, Neumann raises his voice. "Come in."

The door creaks open. A new voice, low-pitched and rumbling. French. "For how exciting this meeting sounded, I apologise that I interrupted it."

A pause. "You're Archeambeau, then?" Neumann asks.

"If I was not, I wouldn't be here. If you'll forgive me, my English is not good."

"Right." A faint cough. "Sit, please. We have much to discuss." And a question in French.

A short, humorous reply. And then, in English, Archeambeau says, "And close that window, if you will. We

wouldn't want anybody listening in."

There are footsteps; someone snaps the window shut and draws the curtains. Lily and Clara stare at each other wide-eyed.

"Shit," Lily murmurs. "Do you think that's them? The potioneer?"

Clara hesitates. "I think so," she agrees after a moment. "I don't like this, Lily."

Lily squeezes her hand. "Me neither," she murmurs. *Britain might as well not exist anymore*, one of them said. She thinks about that for a while, cold wind reddening her nose, sitting with Clara as the night closes in around them. Neither goes back to the dorm for a long time.

My Dearest James,

I've been trying to write you a letter for a while and failing each time. I'm not quite sure what to say; that's a lie, I know what to say, I just don't know how to say it. So we're in a sort of flux. Have you been the same way? Trying to write but unable to? I haven't heard from you. But I suppose that's to be expected, considering...

I think of it a lot. Everybody thinks of it a lot. It's one of the most speculated-upon situations in magical Europe right now, which is saying a lot considering the fallout in Slovakia, as well as everything going on in Berlin. Everything going on everywhere. It feels like every day the noose is getting tighter. Riddle has started this great catastrophic domino effect and it's unclear just how messy things will get before something gives. What that something will be, I'm not sure. People think it'll be the

statute finally breaking — when the muggles figure us out, when the tension of our strained relationship to them snaps like elastic. Others think it'll be him killing some other leader. The German magical president, or the head of the northern magical coalition, or maybe something as small but far-reaching as the killing of the Sanctuary's leader, Neumann. Then again, he's not very popular right now, so I'm not entirely sure it'd break us. Maybe just crack us a bit, enough to make us fragile.

Everything feels like it hangs in a precarious balance. I don't know why I'm telling you that; you know. Especially if the rumours about Britain are true. London burning at its edges and the Order dead and buried. Radio silence. I miss 'Direct Action'. I miss you. I miss Remus, too, who has not written a word to me since the raid on the train. He's off doing some job for the wolves. He told you that, didn't he? Did he? I don't know how much he told you.

I've told myself, promised myself, this'll be the letter I send you. But I don't know that I'm able to. I still feel terrible about what happened that day. It's been two months, two and a half now, almost three. And I still feel guilty about it. Do you blame me? I feel lucky most of the time. Out here in Rostock with him rotting at Hogwarts. I think a lot about whether he's okay. Whether any of them are okay.

That settles it: I won't be sending this. I'm not going to make you read that last bit, James Potter. You have put me through too much grief and worry for me to reasonably want to put you through the same. And I don't think it's my job to do that. The world is probably doing it for you.

I'm rambling now. None of this makes much sense. I'm scattered and clumsy with my words as of late and I don't like it. I finally finished 'Hamlet' the other day. Haven't

picked up anything else since. I've had less and less time to read. Things are hectic out here. Are they the same over there, wherever you are? Order HQ, somewhere else? Or are you sitting in an open casket? Waiting for him to find you? Lights off, pretending not to be home?

I don't think you're a coward. People here think that cowardice is what it is, but I don't believe them. You wouldn't do that for a moment. Let people die and suffer just to save your own skin. Would you?

Lily presses a Mark onto the nurse on duty outside the infirmary. "I just want to see her," she says.

The nurse — something Werner — looks up at her, raising a dark eyebrow. "You're here an awful lot," he comments.

"I know," Lily replies. "Let me past?"

"I'm not supposed to..."

"Please?"

Werner cocks his chin up a bit, scoffing. "What will you do if I say no? Curse me?"

Lily feels her face burn. Every time someone reminds her of the Trace, she sort of wants to cry. Or hit something. "No," she sighs. "Just... listen, it's important to me. I'm the one that found her. We're friends."

"No you're not. She's not friends with anybody. Crazy old hag..." Werner sighs, seeming to realise he's not going to win this argument. "Go on." And he opens the door to the ward.

Lily grins at him. "I owe you one."

He spins the rusty Mark between his fingers. "This is your deposit. I'll call in the favour someday, Evans."

"Right." *If either of us lives that long.* She steps past him and into the infirmary. Werner closes the door behind her.

It's thick with an aniseed smell in here, like the attendants have been trying and failing to drown out the stench of blood that lingers in the walls. The infirmary is a converted master bedroom, stuffed almost to the brim with conjured metal-framed cots and bustling with nurses and healers who dart from bed to bed for morning check-ups. It's down the hall from the *graben* ward, which is a far less pleasant, airy space. Most of the people in that room don't like the curtains open. They lie in the heavy, hot, stinking darkness all day and none of them move. Like nesting insects, Lily thinks often. She's only been in there half a dozen times.

The bed closest to the left-hand window is her destination right now, so she puts thoughts of the *gegraben* out of her mind, squeezing between the cots and past harried-looking healers, mumbling apologies as she goes. By the time she reaches it, plopping down into the seat at its side, she feels altogether quite flustered. The Sanctuary has had that feeling to it recently. Everything feels too small.

"I got them for you," Lily sighs, and tosses the tube of parma violets into the woman's lap.

The witch stirs, rolling her head around to look at Lily, having previously been staring out of the window. "Ah. How did you manage that?"

"Friend of a friend bought them. Tourist shop on the front, by the ocean in town."

“Thank you.” With deft hands, the woman begins to unwrap the plastic around the top of the tube, tearing it down in clear strips.

Lily watches her for a while. Almost three months, December drawing closer now, and she still doesn’t know her name.

The woman ignores her scrutiny. She pops a flat purple sweet out of the top of the wrapper and crunches it between her back teeth. She’s really not that old, Lily thinks with a small amount of resentment for Werner. Forty at most. She doesn’t have the aged, corpse-like look to her of the patients in the ward down the hallway. She’s been looking healthier each week; Lily wonders when they’ll release her. Maybe never. Nobody seems to trust her much. Nobody seems to trust anybody much right now.

“I think I’ve figured it out,” Lily says eventually.

The woman looks up at her, raising a dark eyebrow. She’s got a very cheekboney face and it manages to make every expression lurch out of her, hyper-emotive. Scowls that could bring thunderclouds and smiles bright enough to dispel them. She oozes magic like it’s something viscous.

“Yes?” she asks.

“It really was Riddle who attacked you. I was right.”

The woman chews on another parma violet, a bit of its pale powder sitting on her bottom lip. “What makes you think that?” she asks eventually.

Lily clears her throat. “Deduction. You’re not on the *graben* ward, so you didn’t get hit with that newly-invented death eater curse, the one that eats you. I don’t know the English

word for it. *Graben*. You're not dying, is my point. Whatever he used on you, it wasn't that. It was something unique. But not strong enough to kill you."

"Hmm," the woman says.

"He's been out of public view for months now. Riddle, I mean. So it makes sense that that might be because he's weak. Wounded, maybe. And that's why he didn't manage it."

"What if it was because I was a worthy opponent?"

Lily thinks of Little Hangleton. "There are none."

"You seem quite sure of your theory."

"If someone else really invented the *graben* curse, he wouldn't have wanted to use it. He would've wanted to kill you his own way. He wouldn't feel... vindicated. Not using someone else's magic."

The woman watches Lily for a while, like she's trying to piece her together. "You talk like you know him," she says eventually. "Riddle, you call him. I'm surprised you know that name."

Lily thinks of Sirius' diaries, of the quiet pain in the pages. The terrifying glimpse she got of the Dark Lord. Cracking the plank of wood into the side of his face. How he didn't even stumble.

"Yeah, well," she mutters, lowering her voice. "There's a lot about that man that I know."

The woman laughs in the back of her throat. "Keeping secrets from the Sanctuary? Tut tut. You are not who you

say you are.”

Lily leans across and grabs her shoulder very firmly. “I let you live that night,” she mutters. “I can take it back.”

The woman stares into her eyes, smile dropping from her face. Lily knows that if she had her wand, the witch would’ve cursed her already. But she doesn’t. One of them has control here, and it’s Lily. And she intends to use it.

“You are right,” the woman says eventually, shoulder twitching; Lily can feel her thrumming pulse through the flesh of the wound there. “It was Riddle. I suppose calling him that name is most fitting, is it not?”

Lily lets her go, sitting back in her seat. “I suspected so. Why didn’t you tell me before?”

“I don’t owe you anything.”

“You owe me your life.”

The woman waves a hand. “I owe lots of people my life,” she says. “You are not special.”

“I think you’ll find I’m very special,” Lily says lightly. “I know a lot more about him than you. Even if he did try to kill you himself.”

The woman laughs right in her face. She crunches down another parma violet. “You’re presumptuous.”

“This is a war. I have to be.”

“But if you’re keeping so many secrets, whose side are you fighting for?”

Lily considers that for a moment. She thinks of James, lost in lights-out Britain. "My own," she says shortly. "Why did he want you dead? Tell me."

"Or?"

"Or I'll make good on my promise."

The witch hesitates. She runs a hand over her head. It was shaved flat when she first arrived, shining and hairless, but now the fuzzy black hair has started to grow out, in need of a cut.

"He's angry," she says eventually. "His wand will not obey him any longer."

Lily blinks. "He doesn't need a wand to hurt people," she replies. She had hoped today wouldn't remind her of that night so much. The shack; Sirius a bristling terrified fireball; James split almost in half. The separation. The ugly aftermath.

"And if that hand of his won't obey him either?" The woman looks past Lily then. "Oh. It's you."

"I hope I am not interrupting," a low voice replies from behind them.

Someone takes the seat beside Lily and she turns, looking up and— up. And up. Extraordinarily tall, the stranger is wild-haired and has a square-jawed face. Their skin is almost as dark as the woman's. They have a windswept, adventurous sort of look about them, and Lily is immediately fascinated by them.

They stick a hand out at her. "Claude Archembeau."

Lily blinks. "The potioneer."

"The eavesdropper," they reply dryly. "I saw you."

Lily feels her face flush. She reaches out to shake their hand. "You two... you two know each other?"

"We've met," Archembeau says. They arch an eyebrow, looking at the woman. "You've seen better days, Dzintara."

"Dzintara!" Lily exclaims, whipping around. "That's your name!"

"I was intending on keeping that private," Dzintara says mildly.

"Yes, well," Archembeau replies. "You're the one who got yourself bed-bound in the Rostock Sanctuary, of all places. I had thought you were smarter than that, by the way Galina spoke of you."

"And where's Galina now?" Dzintara says pointedly.

Claude's face doesn't change; they watch her for a long, ugly moment. Then they look away. "Fair point."

"How's the kid? Dead, I presume."

"I would not know."

"Well, let him know he should change his name and move to the Arctic Circle if he wants a chance of surviving this."

Lily looks between them both, feeling quite lost. She considers getting up and giving them some privacy and then decides not to give this opportunity to gather information up. If there's any time for it, it's now.

“Which kid?” she asks Archembeau. “What are you talking about?”

Archembeau glances at her. “It is none of your business,” they say.

Lily chews her lip and tries to figure out the best way to proceed. She resolves to stay quiet for now. To see how this goes down.

“They bought you, did they?” Dzintara asks Archembeau after a moment. “I wouldn’t have thought they could afford it.” She gestures around the packed room.

Archembeau snorts. “They managed it. My service is theirs for as long as they need it. They want me to find a cure for this—” They cut off, trying to find the right word in English. “The curse,” they finish after a moment. “Nasty thing. Eats you.”

“The *graben* curse,” Lily fills in despite herself.

Archembeau gives her a strange look. “I am not German.”

“Me neither,” she replies. “But I live here now. So do you.”

They blink. “Sorry,” they say, affronted. “Who are you?”

“Lily Evans.” Lily nods to them. “I work here.”

“...Right. Well, if you would excuse us.”

She shakes her head. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“The girl is stubborn as a goat,” Dzintara says. “Has not left me alone for the months I’ve been here. My recovery has been slowed by it.”

“Like it’s bothered you,” Lily snorts, rolling her eyes.

Archembeau barks a laugh. “Cheek,” they say. “Fine. Stay. I only wished to see if the rumours about you were true, Dzintara. You lost to him. Even crippled as he is now. Pathetic.”

Dzintara frowns darkly. “He didn’t manage to kill me. And rumour has it you lost to him, too. March.”

It hits Lily then. “Oh my god,” she says. “It’s you.”

Archembeau looks at her. “It’s who?”

“You. You were in Little Hangleton, you— you know Sirius,” Lily says in a jumbled rush. She grabs their broad arm. “You took him with you. You know where he is.”

Looking very affronted, Archembeau tugs their arm out of her grip. “Get off me.”

“Where is he? He’s—”

“Stop,” Archembeau cuts in, so commanding that Lily’s mouth snaps shut. They turn back to Dzintara. “For your information, I lost while he was at his fullest power. You lost while he was... as he is now. A shadow. Dying, if the rumours are true.”

“You know he’s not,” Dzintara snorts. “He is... sick. Unwell. But not dying.”

“He cannot use magic.”

“With *that* wand, he can perform it about as well as anybody. But no. It is not loyal to him, not fully. Not anymore.”

Archembeau watches Dzintara for a moment. “And the... arm?”

Their voice is oddly taut as they say it, full of tension. Like there is some unspoken emotion in it.

Dzintara’s eyes flash. She lowers her voice and murmurs, “He is afraid. His body is betraying him.”

“And yet you lie here.”

“A scared animal is at its most dangerous.”

“He’s far from animal.”

Dzintara pops the last parma violet into her mouth. “He’s not human either,” she replies.

“And whose fault is that?”

“It wasn’t I who asked him to make—”

Archembeau raises a hand, pointing to Lily. “We have an audience.”

Lily scowls. “I’m not leaving.”

They stand abruptly. “I will find you again,” they say to Dzintara. “We’re not done here.”

“Wait—” Lily tries to grab their arm but they step out of the way. “Wait. I have a question.”

Archembeau raises an eyebrow at her. Their travelling cloak hangs dark around them and they really do look so cool. It’s just... something about them. Lily can’t put her finger on it.

“Yes?” they ask impatiently.

Lily clears her throat. “Sirius,” she says. “Is he alive?”

They watch her. Eventually, they reply, “I don’t know. He and I don’t talk.”

“But—”

“I suspect he’s alive,” Archembeau continues with force. “He’s a survivor. Good for him, I suppose. Now, if you’d excuse me.”

They sweep out of the room, dodging around beds and healers. They do not look back.

“That’s Claude for you,” Dzintara sighs, with no small amount of irritation. “They are nothing if not...”

“If not what?”

A glance. “Volatile. Your Sanctuary has made a risky decision,” Dzintara says. “Employing them.”

“I made a risky decision saving you.”

“You will hold it over me until I die.”

Lily nods once. “I will,” she promises. It feels like debt is one of the only languages she speaks these days. She stands up. “I’ll be back later.”

“You’ve resorted to threats?” Dzintara chortles.

“Not a threat,” Lily counters. And then, “Sure. Fine. It’s a threat.”

She backs out from between the beds. Dzintara raises a hand to stop her. "When you track down Claude again," she says. "Ask them something for me."

Lily hesitates. "What is it?"

Dzintara's lip twitches at the corner, but it's not a smile. "Ask them how the little girl is doing," she instructs.

Lily thrums with tension as she rushes through the halls of the Sanctuary, half-running down the stairs from the infirmary. She buzzes with energy like she's been electrocuted. It's a miserable day outside, flat and grey with heavy clouds that suggest snow drifting in over the waters in the distance, but Lily feels lit alight on the inside, fire burning under her guts.

Unfortunately, however, before she can track down Claude again, duty calls. She hunts down Clara in the communal hall on the ground floor, lined up with a plate for rations, and grabs her arm, cutting into the queue.

"Sorry," Lily says to the people behind her. "Sorry, I'll only be a minute. Clara, listen."

Clara looks at her like she's insane. "Where have you been?! I woke up and you were gone—"

"I went to talk to her," Lily hisses. "The woman. I found out a lot this time. I'll tell you about it later— listen. I've got a shift with the kids this morning, watching them. I'll be there 'til dinner. You're at the infirmary this morning, right?"

Clara watches her, wide-eyed. "Uh, yeah?"

“Okay, great. Listen. Ask the other nurses about it — see if you can figure out where they’re keeping Archembeau. Where they’re, uh, working. I’ve got to find them and talk to them—”

“What?!”

“I know it’s insane!” Lily mutters. “I know, trust me. I... listen, I spoke to them this morning. And I need to find them again. So just... try to track them down for me, okay? I’ll see you at dinner.”

She tries to slip back out of the line but Clara grabs her arm. “Wait. This is... this is crazy, do you know how important they are?”

Lily shrugs, forcing a smile. A nonchalance that she can’t truly feel. “I dunno,” she says. “I’ll... figure it out. You know. Listen, I can explain it all later. Just... just trust me.”

“You owe me,” Clara warns. “Come on, stay for breakfast —”

Lily slips away from her. “I’m already late!” she calls over her shoulder, rushing off out of the room and down the hallway towards the stairs. A few people call her name as she passes, probably looking for a chat, but Lily stops for none of them. She’s got to get through today; and she’s got far too much to think about to even consider stopping to talk.

“Lily!” Mattias cries the moment she steps into the Hogwarts kids’ dormitory.

She barely manages to catch him in time, swinging him around and laughing, though her arms ache with it. "Matt! Are you trying to kill me?"

"Put me down," he demands, laughing.

Lily lowers him to the ground and messes up his hair in her hand. "Is everybody else outside already?"

Mattias nods once. "They'll be back in soon. We haven't eaten yet."

"I see."

"They let me play with them yesterday!" he exclaims excitedly. "I think the boys are starting to like me."

Lily beams, sitting on one of the beds. "That's fantastic, Mattias! Have you been doing what I said?"

"Ask questions, listen," Mattias repeats dutifully.

"Failsafe way to make them like you," Lily assents, tapping the side of her nose with a finger.

Mattias grins. He jumps up onto the bed to sit beside her. "The younger ones aren't too bad to me either. They keep mostly to themselves."

Lily winces. She would point out that that's probably the trauma of it all — the raid, the move, all of this. But she doubts Mattias knows what 'trauma' means.

"They'll come out of their shells eventually," she encourages, dropping an arm around his shoulders. "You just have to be patient with them. And kind. As kind as you can be."

“They’re so quiet, though. I dunno what to say to them.”

“Does asking questions not work?”

“Sometimes. But...” Mattias sighs. “They mostly ignore us. They have nightmares, too. They cry a lot. It keeps us awake.” He yawns for effect.

Lily glances around. “It’s getting crowded in here,” she admits, peering at the shoved-together beds. It stinks; the sheets all need washing, but nobody’s had time to do it.

“Too many people,” Mattias agrees, leaning against her side. “It makes me feel weird sometimes. Like. Crushed.”

Lily sighs. “You’ll get used to it eventually,” she promises.

Mattias shrugs. “It’ll be even worse after next year,” he says glumly.

Lily would like to correct that there won’t be a war next year, but doesn’t think she could get the words out if she wanted to. She says nothing.

“Can you ask the Matron something?” Mattias asks after a stretch of quiet.

“What is it?”

Mattias hesitates. “Where’s all the food gone?”

Before Lily can even begin to process that, the door opens and a gaggle of kids pour in, laughing loudly. Mattias jumps off the bed, presumably embarrassed, and runs off into their midst, attaching himself to a group of boys his age. One of them slings an arm around his shoulders and knuckles the top of his head. She is distinctly reminded of

the Marauders in their youth as she looks at them. Raucous and ephemeral.

The Matron bustles in after them, shoos the kids into the room. A wiry, wild-haired woman in her fifties, already greying, she always gives Lily the vague impression of a very ruffled bird.

“Ah, Evans,” she calls. “Just in time to serve breakfast. Come, they’ve just levitated a cart up.”

Lily gets up and crosses the room, weaving between the kids. “Mattias wanted me to ask— what’s... is something wrong with the food?”

Matron casts her a strange look. “What has he been saying about my food?”

“Nothing!” Lily amends. “Nothing. Just that there was... less of it? I think?”

“Well.” Matron purses her lips, looking very much like she’s trying but failing to look stern. “Well, as of the last few days, yes. But it’s none of your concern, Evans.” She hesitates and then, with the appearance of a gossiping maid, leans closer to murmur, “None of mine, either, by the way they’re treating me. You would swear the staff aren’t to be trusted! For all I’ve done for them— well. It’s an atrocity, if you ask me.”

Lily gasps, furrowing her brows. “They haven’t told you what’s going on?” she asks, outraged. “The girls in my dorm have heard lots about it.”

The Matron’s head snaps up. “They have, have they?”

“Yeah.” Lily makes a show of glancing around. “Apparently the Sanctuary’s paid a ton for some French potioneer to come try to cure the *graben* curse. Paid tons of money for it. They’re pretty broke now. It was Neumann’s idea.”

“Oh, that man,” Matron fumes. “And I suppose they didn’t think to inform us? The people keeping this place afloat? There was no vote, this is ridiculous. Nepotism at its finest.”

That is self-evidently not the correct use of the word ‘nepotism’, but Lily isn’t about to be the one to correct it. “They didn’t tell you anything about it?”

“No! Just started sending up less food a few days ago. Far less.” Matron grabs Lily by the arm and pulls her down the hallway to the food cart at the top of the stairs. The ration packs atop it are indeed far less plentiful than usual. A small pile, a dozen. Enough that the kids will all have to share.

Lily blinks, then scowls, not sure whether she’s faking it. “It’s not fair. If anybody doesn’t deserve this, it’s the kids.”

“Of course.” Matron folds her arms, frowning. “And you would think they would be transparent with us.”

“Ridiculous,” Lily agrees. She hesitates. “I can dish up the food today. The sheets need changing, if you want to spend the morning doing that. I can deal with the kids, honestly. They’re not such a handful.”

Matron looks at her, confused. “You’re sure, dear? They’re a lot of work alone.”

“Honestly,” Lily repeats. “You deserve a break. You can spend the morning with the nurses. I know you’re all good friends. You can tell them the news.”

Matron's face breaks into a warm smile. She pats Lily's arm roughly. "Atta girl." And she totters off down the hallway.

Lily glances over her shoulder at her before slipping a ration from the cart into her pocket.

She serves the kids breakfast. Dry crackers and small pots of jam. The rations are muggle; nobody here has the sort of money that could get them a house elf and even if they did, the politics of this place wouldn't allow it. Cheap stuff still in production after the war, only available on this side of the Iron Curtain.

None of them complain about the food shortage, though they all look dejected. Lily takes Mattias aside after they're all done eating and slips him the stolen pack.

"Our little secret," she tells him. "Keep it for later, if you want."

Mattias looks at her with big eyes, then down at the pack in his hands. "Can I share it with the others?"

Lily cocks her head to the side. "If you want," she replies, feeling like a bad person. "But I would keep it if I was you." *I don't want to die*, she remembers screaming on the train. She tries desperately to forget.

He nods slowly. "I'm going to share it."

"Alright." Lily rubs the top of his head. "Maybe you would've been a Hufflepuff. You're very kind."

He grins at her. "But brave too."

"Brave too," Lily agrees. "Go on."

He runs off to go back to his friends. They all pile onto the same twin bed, cross-legged and laughing and capering. Kids. None of them have used magic before. For all they know, they might not even have it. There's been nobody to teach them what their powers mean, why they're here. What the war is and what it will do to them if it finds them. Nobody has had time.

When she thinks about it too much, Lily gets sad. She resolves to put it out of her mind, standing up and crossing the room to one of the younger kids, a little girl crying by the window, to see what she can do about that.

One problem at a time.

Lily,

I didn't find out anything about the potioneer (I'm sorry!), nobody seems to know anything about them. We need to talk; you've got stuff to tell me, right? I took another night shift because Mattes is sick and he wants to get to sleep early. That's love, right? I'll be back late. Stay awake.

Clara.

Clara crawls into bed beside her later that night and they lie nose-to-nose with their heads on the same pillow, watching each other in the dark. The sounds of sleeping teens in the dorm fill the air. Snores and quiet breaths. Someone is crying in the darkness and nobody has gotten up to reassure them, to ask if they're alright.

This dorm is mostly the displaced, the majority of them young refugees and runaways. Adolescent wizards and witches from the other side of the Iron Curtain whose

parents have been lost to Riddle's war. Runaway Berliners, ex people-smugglers. A handful of Hogwarts students, most of them strangers to Lily. Recently, a few Slovaks, and lots of French. None of them have anywhere left to belong. All of them came here looking for salvation of some kind and found only a weekly wage, a bed to sleep in and work to be done.

Lily is the first to speak. "I can't tell you much," she murmurs.

Eyes large, Clara nods once. "You know them," she whispers. "The potioneer. Right? Or you know who they are."

"Sort of."

"Tell me about it."

Lily knows the room is full of potential eavesdroppers. Potential leaks. She clears her throat very quietly and shuffles closer, until her and Clara's knees knock together.

"Earlier this year," she murmurs. "Right before I came here. I was... I was living in London."

Clara nods, hot breath ghosting against the bottom of her face. "Yeah. You told me."

"And I... I was there. For Little Hangleton."

"Oh."

Lily nods. "I was visiting her. The woman. And... the potioneer shows up, and I know them. From then. They know one of my... friends. And I think I need to talk to them again if I want to understand any of this. If I want to be able

to get my head around it. I need to ask them what they know.”

Clara peers at her. “What is this about, Lily?” she whispers.

“It’s about...” And Lily doesn’t know how to answer. The war? Britain? James? Remus? Sirius? “It’s about some people that I know. That’s all.”

“You should tell someone. A leader. Someone who can help.”

“It’s more complicated than that,” Lily murmurs. She reaches her hands out under the covers and finds Clara’s, holding them tightly. Every conversation she’s had for weeks has felt like she’s talking to a child — every conversation except the one with Archembeau, that is. This is no exception.

“What do you know?”

Lily thinks of the diaries. *The fourth*. The great tangle of it writhes inside her head, a venomous snake of an idea. Potential. That’s the word. Potential. Lots of pieces that she wants to be able to fit together.

“I don’t know,” she murmurs, a half-truth, like most things these days. “But I intend to find out.”

Across the room, the sobbing gets louder. Someone shouts in sharp, fierce French. There is bickering in a language Lily doesn’t know.

Clara burrows closer to her and Lily realises she’s shaking. She’s from the south of Germany. Her parents ran off to Lithuania a few months ago and she ran here. She’s the only person in the world Lily has that she would consider a

current, here-and-now friend. Non-hypothetical. In practice, not theory. Not a ghost like Remus or something ghoulish and undead like James.

"We'll be okay," Lily murmurs, squeezing her hands tightly. "I promise."

"You can't go back to Britain."

"I know. I won't."

"And if you do?"

Lily hesitates. "You can come with me."

Clara inhales. She looks up at Lily and her face says clearly, with painful honesty, that she is terrified of being alone. It scares her more than the war ever could. Lily doesn't know that she can relate.

"Okay," Clara whispers. "Just... keep me up to date on everything. Alright? Everything that happens. Everything you learn."

Lily nods. She leans in closer. "Was it the truth?" she breathes. "When you said you don't know anything?"

She feels Clara tense up beside her. The silence goes ugly.

"No," Clara admits after a moment. "No, I wasn't."

"Can you tell me what you learnt?"

Another sharp inhale. "You're going to go see them."

"I'm going to fix this." Lily doesn't know what this is. This being Sirius, the great mystery of him. This being herself,

the stagnance that is killing her. The tired hungry ache of war. "I'm going to fix this."

Clara nods once. "They're in a room beside the... the ward," she whispers. "Makeshift potions lab. I snuck in. It's locked but not guarded."

Lily feels excitement, potential, inevitability. All of it in equal measure.

"Perfect," she murmurs. "Perfect."

"Lily." Clara's hands in hers flex a bit. "Lily, you can't make them angry. They can't leave. We can't let them leave."

Lily squints at her. "I know that."

"No, you don't." She hesitates. "People are saying we're in debt, Lily. Lots of debt."

"To who?"

Clara shrugs a shoulder. She lowers her voice further still, until it is only the rasping overpass of her consonants that sounds out. "Since Britain wouldn't help us," she whispers. "We had to borrow a lot. This person, they're our last chance at saving those people. Don't... don't put that at risk, you can't. You can't."

Lily isn't sure how she could conceivably do so, even if she wanted to. But Clara's voice is very choked up. She's afraid.

"I won't," she breathes. "I promise. I won't."

It is the following morning that the letter arrives. And in the ensuing chain of events, it's probably the thing that starts them all.

Lily,

So I know this is unprecedented. I'm sorry I haven't written. It's been a strange few months. For you too, I suppose. For everyone.

I won't make this overlong. On my job to Hungary, I found him. Sirius. And he's not alone. Mary's here too, but she won't be for long. She's dying.

We need help. Is there room for her in Rostock?

Please answer as soon as you can. The owl knows where to find us.

- Remus Lupin.

"Holy shit," Lily can't stop saying at the breakfast table. "Oh Merlin."

Someone to her left pushes a slice of dry toast at her to shut her up. Clara shoots her an exasperated look.

"So you really thought she was dead all this time?" she asks, mostly humouring her.

"I mean," Lily says, "yeah. They didn't announce anything different. Oh, god. Oh, god, does Dorcas know?" *Is Dorcas even alive?* "And Marlene. Oh, fuck. Marlene. And James. Someone needs to... I need to..."

She trails off. None of their letters into magical Britain have gotten any response in weeks. It's probably not worth trying.

Clara snaps her fingers in front of her face. "Eat something. You need to eat something."

"Right." Lily crunches into the slice of dry toast and glances around. The mess hall is full of dour faces. Even if they don't know the details, most people have figured out by now that something is very wrong. Everyone looks extraordinarily tired.

Neither she nor Clara got much sleep last night, Lily wide awake for most of it, brain loud with theories. She's perfectly aware that none of this is healthy, but nothing about her has been healthy since she got onto the Hogwarts Express at the start of fifth year and realised that Sirius Black was missing. None of her has been healthy for a long time: not when she sheared her hair with craft scissors in the bathroom back in Kettering, Petunia knocking furiously on the door, more than a year ago now. Not when she got on the train to London from Bridgend Station without stopping to think about it. Not now and here.

There's someone shouting across the room, in tense, fierce German. Lily doesn't look up; fighting is common, and none of it is worth listening to anyway. You can't reasonably expect anything else in these times. Murmurs sweep up and down the table. She pays little attention.

"Are you going back up there today?" Clara leans in to murmur.

Lily glances up. "Yeah," she says. "Just want to go after nine. There'll be less people around then."

Anxious, Clara chews on her lip. “Be careful.”

“Of course. Always.”

“I mean it. Whatever you’re caught up in—”

Lily raises a hand. She tilts her head to the side, trying to say with her expression, *not here*.

Clara purses her lips. “I don’t like this,” she mutters.

And she can understand why. This place has felt distinctly like it’s been hanging in the balance for weeks now. On the precipice of some great unforeseen disaster.

“Me neither,” Lily confesses. “But we’ve got to stay optimistic. Have you spoken to Mattes? Is he feeling better?”

“I don’t care about that,” Clara mutters.

“Never thought I’d see the day.”

“Lily.”

Lily raises her hands. “I know what you’re thinking. I’m okay. We’re okay.”

Clara glances left and right. Then she leans in closer still, eyes very intent. “Tell me,” she says lowly. “Tell me that this... this thing with the kid. Tell me it won’t bring us trouble.”

Lily inhales. She lets it out brusquely. “This has so little to do with Sirius Black, you’ve got no idea. I don’t... it’s not about him.”

"We're in enough shit with you-know-who already. We can't bring... we can't bring that upon ourselves."

"I'm not planning on it."

"Still."

Lily frowns. "I'm going to keep things under control," she promises. "I've given enough to this place." *Enough time. Enough of myself.* "I'm not going to let anything happen to it."

One of the boys whaps her over the back of the head. "Out of the way, Evans, we can't see the fighting."

She looks up. A brawl has broken out across the hall between two young women who arrived only a few days ago. Runaways from some far stretch of Europe, fleeing magical war. Tearing at each other with clawed hands, with their teeth. Screaming and sobbing. Sisters, by the looks of them, or maybe just friends. Their voices ring with immeasurable loss.

"Shit," Clara sighs. "Is anybody going to break them up?"

"Bit of a spectacle," Lily agrees uncomfortably. And she peers around the room at the tired faces in every direction and feels, again, the cold, terrifying certainty that this is almost nothing left that she wouldn't do.

She sneaks up to the infirmary after nine, when most workers have left to attend their posts building the surrounding wall or preparing food, or working for a wage down in Rostock to buy more scarce rations. The halls are

eerily quiet; usually people linger around corners, talking, loitering. But today it's very quiet.

Every window lets in a splash of fuzzy white daylight against the opposite wall. It's never fully sunny anymore; no shadows are distinct. Dementors sweeping a cold spell up the northern coastline, into Sweden and Finland from their posts in Brittany and Normandy.

Lily wraps her arms around herself and pads up the third flight of stairs right to the top, hesitating there for a while, listening. There are murmuring voices in the general ward, where Dzintara is probably pretending to sleep, and the faint sound of gentle, undulating hubbub. The rattling of the medicine tray. Across the hall, the *graben* ward is deadly silent, and despite the slant of the daylight, no glow emanates from under the crack in the door, just a pitted dark stripe.

"Okay," Lily says to herself quietly. She tries to steel her nerves and tiptoes lightning-fast past the general ward and to the door of its twin. There she hesitates, hand on the cold doorknob.

She could leave now. Leave this stranger, who knows Sirius, who knows Dzintara's secret. Could leave the whole thing as a bad idea. She could abandon the venture at its start. She probably should; god knows she's better off if she's not personally involved. London taught her that.

But try as she might, Lily cannot turn away from the door. From the possibility of this. Every time she blinks she can only see the faces of her friends. The things they lost that night in Little Hangleton, a pain more intimate than the rest of them, who lost only the conceptual entity of safety and truth.

She tries to make something braver of herself. Closes her finger around the knob and twists.

Inside it's fiercely dark. There are sharp groans as Lily steps inside from the faint, fuzzy shapes of beds all around. Light. They don't like the light.

Quickly, seeing her opportunity, Lily closes the door behind herself. She sweeps into the ward and fumbles past the shape of a nurse in the blackness, who does not try to stop her. Nobody does. It's dark enough that she's not sure how they can work.

Then again, there may not be much work to be done. It's not like there is any healing happening here. Only quiet easing. Comfort. The painful wait for oblivion. She knows it like an old friend.

Absurdly, pressing past the cold metal frame of a bed, Lily remembers a conversation she had with James years ago now. More than two. Telling him she was afraid she would make it out of the war and be the only one. Telling him in waxy words how she was afraid of death but unwilling to say it out loud.

And god, if only she had known. She pauses and listens to the heavy, hot quiet. Raspy breathing and the rattling of choked lungs. If only she had known, and she tears up, eyes stinging; she tries to wipe them, heaving furiously. It does not help.

"Merlin," she whispers, and pounds a fist again and again against the top of her chest.

"Get it together," a nurse murmurs, passing her. Assuming, likely, that Lily is one of his own. "Or step out."

“Sorry,” Lily gasps. By his tone, she can assume that breakdowns on the *graben* ward are not uncommon. She swallows hard and tries to force down a mouthful of saliva, tasting salt. Her nose is so stuffy she has to breathe through her mouth. She doesn’t know who she’s crying for. More than likely, it’s for herself.

“And you think this will work?” the nurse asks from nearby in the blackness.

Lily flinches so hard she almost stumbles. But he’s not talking to her; he’s facing away, voice muffled a bit.

“There’s only one way to find out,” comes the rumbling reply.

And Lily freezes. Because if she knows they’re here, Archembeau has to know that she’s here too.

She doesn’t move an inch.

“And if the patient dies?” the nurse asks.

“Then I will try again on another,” Archembeau replies promptly. “Do you want me to do this or not?”

“Of course.” A hesitation. “Does she need to be awake?”

“I don’t think we could wake her if we tried.”

Very, very slowly, Lily fumbles her way through the dark and wraps a shaking hand around the metal bedframe the voices are closest to. She feels her way around the side of it until she is standing over the patient. When she squints, she thinks she can just about make out the form of them. Dark hair and a rasping throat. Dead to the world.

“Let’s get this over with,” the nurse says from the other side of the bed.

There is a shuffling. From the darkness a tiny light blooms, fiercely bright. Lily has to blink a few times for her eyes to adjust. It’s a small vial of brilliant gold potion, glowing in the blackness, pulled free from a leather sheath. It illuminates Claude’s face like candlelight. They are looking right at her.

Lily tries to will them not to say anything. They watch her for a moment and then their eyes flick down to the woman before them. Fifty, by the looks of her, Lily can see now by the light of the potion. Or maybe far younger. She is so wizened and blackened by the *graben* that she barely looks human.

She does not stir with the light. Others in the ward do, though. Groaning like the undead, coming alive. Hands covering their faces.

“Quickly,” the nurse hisses, not noticing Lily.

Claude pulls the stopper from the vial with their teeth. With deft, dark hands, they peel the bandages along the woman’s sternum open to reveal a sopping black wound beneath, weeping grime. It is moving. There is something moving inside. The smell is horrendous. Lily looks away, trying not to retch. She watches from the corner of her eye as the potioneer, with a practiced hand, raises the vial above the wound and drips the liquid in.

It fizzes and hisses something incredible, spitting smoke and emanating a fierce wave of heat. The woman comes awake screaming; for a moment, Lily is sure she’s going to die. That this won’t be the one.

And she watches the bright, hot liquid sink beneath the skin, glowing up through flesh and veins like thunder through clouds. It's almost a creation.

The woman gasps. Her black veins are already receding. The light grows fainter but even in the dim, Lily watches her eyes gain a sort of fevered awareness, staring around wildly, a trapped animal.

"Yes," Archembeau murmurs. "Yes, that's right."

"Is it working?" the nurse demands. He is out of sight, already obscured by the returning shadow.

Archembeau makes a noise of assent. "Keep an eye on her," they say. "And report back to me."

They push to their feet. Darkness descends as if they have made it so.

This time, Lily follows them out of the ward, out into the groaning sunlight and into their lab behind them; they do not stop her. In fact, they open the door for her and usher her inside, as if knowing this is inevitable.

It's a sort of déjà vu, being back in a potions lab. Lily hasn't been in a real one since Hogwarts, and she doesn't count the kitchen table in the apartment in Lambeth. She had to leave her old potions kit behind when she left and she misses it every day, less for what it can do and more for what it meant.

It's a controlled chaos here. There are a dozen cauldrons strewn across the floor in one corner, all of them empty and cold, and a smaller one bubbling on the windowsill. Dozens of glass vials, most unsorted, litter the shelves. Plastic

muggle shopping bags of animal hide. Knives, dozens of them, of all shapes and sizes.

“Sit,” Archembeau instructs.

Lily does not oblige. “What was that?” she demands. “What you did to her. Tell me.”

They collapse heavily into the seat behind the desk by the window. They gesture once again for Lily to sit on the other side.

And once again Lily does not obey. “The potion,” she says. “You cured it. You did it. You can save them. What are you waiting for— save them— save them all!”

They watch her intently. Lily gets the impression they are not seeing her, but someone else in her stead.

“Unfortunately,” they say eventually, “I don’t believe that that is currently possible.”

“Why?!” Lily demands.

“Sit,” they say again.

Lily hesitates. Then she crosses the room and sits opposite them, folding her arms tightly across her stomach.

“Now,” Archembeau says coolly. “Ask whatever it is you really want to ask.”

“Excuse me?”

They gesture to her as if it’s self-explanatory. “I know you’re not here out of an interest in my... potions.” They seem to struggle for the right word in English. “Sirius,” they say eventually, as if addressing him. “You know him.”

"I know a lot of things," Lily snaps.

"Ask."

"Tell me what he's doing," she blurts. "Where he is. And don't just tell me that. Tell me more. Tell me what's going on with Dzintara. How she knows Riddle. Tell me what she meant— she mentioned— she mentioned a little girl." And Lily hears her voice crack.

Those dark eyes scrutinise her. After a moment, Claude Archembeau stands up. They offer their hand.

"Get up," they say.

"What?"

"Get up."

Lily stands slowly. Archembeau takes her arm and she feels the ground whisked out from under her, the whipsnap cursing pain of apparition jolting her like voltage. And she finds the ground beneath her feet again and blinks into the grey sunlight.

She and Archembeau are standing in a graveyard. France, by the language on the headstones. An orchard of weeping willows lies heavy and wafting in a faint breeze on the edge of the plot. Beyond it, fields of lavender. There are no houses, just a dirt road.

"There," Archembeau says. They gesture to the grave right in front of the pair of them.

Lily blinks, then squints. She gets down on one knee to peer at the tiny writing.

'AMELIE BULLSTRODE', it reads simply.

"Oh my god," Lily murmurs. And she covers her mouth with a hand and says between her fingers, "Oh my god."

Claude does not move to comfort her. "Died three days after we took her from Little Hangleton," they say. "Sirius Black and I, and a friend. Rotted out of her skull. Long-term possession. Nothing left of her."

Lily has no tears left to cry. It is too cold for rain. She just stares at it, imagining beneath her knees the rotting corpse of Amelie Bullstrode clawing fingers against the underside of the coffin door. But it is silent.

"Sirius did not speak, after Little Hangleton," Claude continues. Simple and uncomplicated, as if it doesn't bother them. "For a long time. I began to worry he, too, was rotting like her."

Lily looks up at him. "She's dead," she whispers. "She died."

Claude crouches down beside her. They drop a hand onto her shoulder. "This is what your Riddle man does. Senselessly and easily. And he will do it more."

"The fourth," Lily murmurs. "The diary. It's... it's..."

"You want to understand."

"Yes."

"I would not recommend it."

"Why?!"

“Because that thing’s head,” Claude says dryly, “is not where you want to die. You are a lot like Sirius. I do not want you to suffer the same ends. Run while you can.”

“He’s still alive, though.”

“Not for long, with the way he is going.” There is a pale scar on the top of their hand, jagged. A bite mark. Human teeth.

Lily looks at it, then looks up at Claude. “What did that?” she asks.

Claude stands. “It is a story for another day,” they say. “Provided you make the wrong decision and you stay.”

“Of course I’m staying,” Lily snaps. “Of course I am.”

“Then know that I’d rather we not speak anymore.”

“No,” she says. “I know enough. I’ve seen enough. I know more about Riddle than most of the Sanctuary combined.”

“And I am not here to fight Riddle,” Claude replies shortly.

“Is healing them not fighting him?”

“Healing them is a job. I do not do favours anymore.”

Lily grabs their arm, their wrist. She squeezes it very tight.

“You said you can’t make any more potions,” she says.

“Why? I know why. You don’t need to tell me.” And a part of it is probably her fault too. Backing up the whole bloody international magical substance trade. “You don’t have the ingredients.”

“I need to hunt,” Claude says levelly. “And hunt soon. We are running out of time.”

“Then let me hunt with you.” Lily pushes to her feet. She grabs them by the front of their shirt and tries to shake them and it doesn’t quite work; they are solid as a fucking lamppost. “Let me hunt. And let me earn it. And then tell me what you know.”

And let me save her. Let me save Mary.

It occurs to Lily that she should mention that Sirius might be coming to Rostock. And she remembers Clara telling her to be careful with this and decides, with ease that scares her, that she isn’t going to say it. Not yet.

“I want to help,” she near-shouts. It echoes through the graveyard. “The *graben* might kill more, might kill everyone I--”

“Oh, shut up,” Claude snaps. “Yes. My answer is yes. You Brits, you are all the same.”

Lily lets go of them. “Oh,” she says. She didn’t expect it to be that easy.

“We have to find a translation spell,” they mutter darkly. “I do not like that word in your mouth. *Graben*. You are not German. Come. We have work to do.”

“You’ll really let me hunt?” she asks.

Claude casts her a long, searching look. “You are not the most hopeless protege I have taken on,” they say, tinged with an unfamiliar nostalgia. “Now. Grab on.”

With one last look around the graveyard, Lily takes Claude’s arm. The world is whisked away from under them and everything goes dark.

Chapter End Notes

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MASTER

Chapter Notes

BAM BAM BAM LET'S GO

this one was fun...like mean but fun...had a lot of fun writing it i hope you enjoy reading it!

tws: injury violence mental illness etc.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

An undulating film of silver and white carves across the scorched earth, pressing rippling folds of glassy light against the ocean of fire stretching miles out from the edge of Bromley. The air is so thick with hanging smoke that Dorcas cannot see her hand in front of her face. Only the fire through the gloom and the barrier holding it back from the edge of the city.

The muggles evacuated the southern side of greater London -- from Bexley to Sutton -- last week, when the fire got close enough that breathing in the air on this side of the Thames became hazardous. Lambeth and Wandsworth and Richmond Upon Thames are due to be cleared out by Sunday. James's old little home at the riverside will be empty and abandoned, sitting alone beneath the heavy red sky.

Dorcas tries not to think about it. It'll drive her insane one of these days.

The smell of it is horrific. She's breathing through a scrap of wet fabric, torn from the lower half of a shirt James stole last week from an abandoned shop in the wastes of

Croydon. No matter how hard she presses it to her face she can still feel the burn of smoke in her lungs and the back of her throat, hot and claustrophobic as a furnace. Her eyes are streaming steadily. She is, once again, on watch. And god. The smell. Like burning flesh; like death itself.

It's the first day of December. As of this morning, James has been formally prohibited from leaving Order HQ. The smoke is too much for his chest and it sends him into twitchy, hacking fits if he breathes too much of it in. So alongside this patrol, it's Dorcas' job to empty the PO box, which will soon stop receiving mail altogether, once the Royal Mail stops delivering to that end of London. At least then they might have a chance to get through it all. Seven sacks of mail stuffed into the wall on Hackney Terrace.

It has begun to feel scarily normal.

"How long d'you think it'll hold?" one of the death eaters along the frontier calls, forty feet away.

Dorcas shrinks back into the shadows of the broken second storey window she's crouched in. The smoke is too dense for them to be able to see her, but she's still taut with terror. It's winter now, and every day it feels more like fear is all that she knows.

"Not long enough," another shouts back. Their figures push through the smoke towards each other. One of them waves his wand to dispel the smog around them and it does little good, only carving a hazy bubble in the centre of it like a globular shuttle.

"Buchanan?!" one of them calls.

"It's Rassmussen!"

“Oh.”

They reach each other. Dorcas squints hard to make out their silhouettes, dark-robed and hunched, outlined at their backs by the roaring fiendfyre curling along London’s south edge, sixty feet out from them and no longer advancing but whipping angrily as if it can sense that it is being restrained and does not like it one bit.

“Couldn’t see you properly,” the second death eater exclaims. A pause. “It’s Lecarde, by the way.”

“I don’t care who you are,” Rassmussen snaps. He lowers his voice; Dorcas strains to hear it. “The shield won’t hold forever. It might not even make it to ‘78--”

“Shh,” Lecarde hisses. He murmurs something Dorcas can’t make out over the rumbling of the fire.

“I know that!” Rassmussen spits. “But just because he *could* put it out doesn’t mean he will. Do you see him around here? Because I don’t. And from what I’ve heard nobody has seen him in months, you’ve heard the rumours--”

“Shut your mouth if you want to keep your tongue,” Lecarde warns, glancing around nervously. He raises his wand and the smoke falls back into place around them. They both cough, hacking, pounding at their clavicles.

“Don’t be a fool,” Rassmussen says. “I’m getting out of here the first chance I get. Especially with the changes at Gringotts-- give it a few more weeks and they probably won’t even let us access our own bloody vaults. Insane, the security is. Did you hear about the vault--”

“Shh!”

“There’s not anybody around to hear--”

“You can’t know that!” Lecarde snipes. In the smog, Dorcas watches him draw himself up to his full height. “And I won’t be taking that risk. I won’t bloody well befriend deserters, Rassmussen. Do you think nothing of bravery?”

“None of us think highly of bravery. You know that. You English should be highly aware,” Rassmussen laughs.

“Loyalty, then. Purity.”

Rassmussen spins in a wide circle, throwing out his arms and gesturing. “Tell me,” he says, “any of this looks pure. If you think you’re saving yourself by staying for him and his cause, you really must be a maniac. Beyond saving.”

“I care about the cause. I care about my family’s honour.”

“Smell the roses. There’s no honor left to stay for.”

“New London--”

“Will fall when the fire reaches it.”

“And we will build it anew. A rebirth.”

“You are far too idealistic, you’re thinking above your station.” Rassmussen reaches through the smoke to grab Lecarde by the arm. Dorcas watches them stare at one another for a jagged moment. “If you want to stay alive, find me tonight. Ne and some friends are meeting. Discussing the best way to keep this movement alive once he’s dead and buried.”

“The Dark Lord cannot die-- he *will not* die--”

“This is a war! Not a conquest, we are not fighting for a messiah, do you think us muggles?”

“You’re faithless! Faithless and a coward, I should report you--”

“But you won’t.”

Lecarde pulls his arm away. “Stay away from me,” he snaps. And he turns away and strides off into the smoke.

Rasmussen watches after him for a while before turning and stalking off in the other direction.

“Shit,” Dorcas murmurs to herself. She thinks for a moment that this will be good information to tell the Order; but she isn’t here for information anymore. That’s not what the watches are for. They’re so the Order knows, if a watchman doesn’t make it home, that the frontier has fallen. That they need to run.

She isn’t a spy any longer. She is more like a canary.

A chemical fire, the muggle news calls it. Originating from a factory on the southern coast of England, eating up towns as it goes. Minimal fatalities; surely it’ll be extinguished by Christmas. The papers blame it on the Fire Brigades’ Union’s first national strike. The Union blames it on unsafe industry. Nobody seems to have actually attended the scene of the blaze. The smoke is far too thick, and if any muggles have gotten close, the death eaters probably made sure they wouldn’t make it back to tell the tale.

It’s been just under two weeks since Dorcas found James on the roof. It’s pathetic but it makes her anxious to go very

long without seeing him now. Like a creeping sickness. The image of his face on the rooftop doesn't ever leave her. She sort of hates herself for it but every time she comes back from a watch shift these days, she's half afraid she's going to come upon the scattered chunks of him on the pavement as she walks up Hackney Terrace.

He hasn't gone up there again in her knowledge. He spends most of his time curled up on their mattress asleep or pretending to be. Dorcas mistrusts almost everything she cannot see with her own two eyes, though, so she jogs back quickly today, through the hanging ash.

Despite the nearby fire, it's still a fiercely cold winter. Snowing most of the time, but none of it is solid by the time it makes it through the smoke overhang. Just brown-black slush which gathers in the gutters and freezes there. If there was anybody left on the south end they would probably be having problems with their plumbing. Apparently the muggle authorities have been piling them into empty hotel buildings and hospitals along the west of England, pushing into Wales.

Dorcas makes it across the black Thames on foot, along the walkway of one of the narrower bridges crossing to the north. There is nobody to come apparate her away from watch shifts anymore: they're all out of Traceless. Every surviving member of the Order has been struck from the registry now, so she travels alone. It takes longer to get back and forth from the south end than she spends there on shifts most of the time.

But she needs to make it back. It is less the watching that is imperative and more the return.

She passes over the silent ash-stained river and up through deserted central London. The odd car passes up and down the dual carriageways of the highstreets but all of the shops are closed and most Londoners have, even if not formally evacuated, made the educated decision to leave if they're able. There are no buses anymore. Dorcas spies one stray taxi whipping around a corner half a mile through the abandoned maze of streets. The distant echo of its rumbling engine is a mournful hark.

Out of the ghostly city centre, central north London is cold with the hovering of hunting dementors. By the time Dorcas makes it to Hackney Terrace, rounding the corner onto the street, she is shuddering and gasping, arms wrapped tight around her stomach. She doesn't see a single soul on the streets. There are still muggles in some of the houses, their anxious faces peering from the windows on occasion. But nobody dares step outside.

Dorcas stumbles to a stop in front of Order HQ. She glances around surreptitiously before staggering to the doorstep and knocking thrice.

It takes longer than usual for someone to answer. She waits out there for almost three minutes, knocking periodically.

"Hello?!" she calls at some point. Nobody answers.

When the door finally opens, Dorcas is freezing and shaking harder than before. She coughs hard.

"Fucking finally," she wheezes. "The last thing you said to me was-- you're not Moody."

Just inside the doorway, Aves peers out at her, looking a bit unwell. There's a hard wrinkle between her brows. "Come in," she says lowly.

“No security question?” Dorcas asks.

She frowns. “Just come in.”

Dorcas looks over her shoulder, frowning. Then she follows Aves inside.

The lights in the entrance hall are off. There’s no light at the end of the corridor, so the fire in the kitchen must still be unlit -- it has been since the floo network went down a week ago. It’s so dark in here out of the harsh grey daylight that Dorcas has to blink furiously to let her eyes adjust.

She knows almost immediately that something’s very wrong. There are voices in the kitchen, speaking in low and frantic tones. Somewhere on the floor above, someone is crying. Returning to grief is nothing unusual, but this time it feels different somehow; the floor seems set at-edge. Dorcas all at once feels an awful, hovering sensation of doom, almost choking.

“What happened?” she asks Aves.

Aves doesn’t look at her. “Attack on the north end,” she says. “They were trying to scope out a safe place to ward against the Trace. To apparate everyone out of the city.”

“We’re not meant to be moving yet.”

“An escape plan. There if we need it. For when we need it.” Aves grabs her by the arm and pulls Dorcas to the stairs. “Go up to your room and stay there.”

“No,” Dorcas says immediately. “No.” And she tries to find Aves’ face in the darkness. “What happened?”

A pause, brief and weighty. "We lost Dearborn," Aves says. "Mullholand. And Moody."

Dorcas feels her whole body go numb. She sits down on the bottom step.

"Oh," she whispers.

Aves hesitates. In the blackness, she sits down on the step beside Dorcas and heaves a sigh, sounding extraordinarily tired.

"They're boxing us in," she murmurs. "Since the fire hit city limits and they cut off the floo, they know they've got us on the back foot. They're going to starve us like rats, and run all the muggles out of London while they do it. And then the city is theirs."

"We can still walk out."

"Not for much longer."

"Then we should before we lose anybody else," Dorcas says.

Aves glances at her. "If we leave," she replies, "they win. War's over. They've got London and they'll take Rostock next. And then Berlin. And then Cannes. And then Naples."

"Then they might as well have already won!"

A shrug. "If you look at it that way, yes," Aves agrees. She hesitates. "I'm leaving soon."

"Coward," Marlene rasps.

"I'm being pragmatic."

"You're being a deserter."

"I'm not a soldier. Neither, by all rights, are you. What are you, seventeen? You should get out while you still can. The other one, too."

Dorcas grimaces. She stands up. "No," she says. And then she falters. "They were attacked while warding? Did they set off the Trace?"

Aves stands up too. She steps into the kitchen doorway, turning back to look at Dorcas over her shoulder.

"No," she says simply. "When they first attacked, the death eaters thought they were muggles. It was for sport."

Dorcas stares. Aves steps into the kitchen and out of sight, disappearing into the gloom. Upstairs, whoever's crying cries harder.

"Shit," Dorcas says, mostly to herself. She draws a steadying breath and hears it whistle in her tight chest, feels the rattle of something caught in the airway that she can't dislodge. If the death eaters don't finish them all off it'll be lung cancer at this rate.

Cautiously, taking a deep breath, she peaks her head around the kitchen door. It's dark inside, only the faint undersides of the blackout curtains letting in slivers of diluted grey light. A cluster of figures sit around the kitchen table. She can't make out their faces. They are speaking in low, worried murmurs. Someone is breathing too quickly, on the edge of a panic attack, and it is discordant against the tight murmuring, but nobody seems to be asking them to leave.

"...the fire," someone is saying. "We should call someone in. Someone foreign."

"I reached out to a group of warders in Ireland the other day," another puts in. "Did it myself. Not by letter. They didn't believe me when I said I'm part of the Order. We're on our own."

A tight knot of guilt and anxiety and other such poisons curls in Dorcas' throat. She steps away from the door and pads as quietly as she can up the stairs, trying to avoid the creaky steps. Nobody calls out to her. The crying has stopped and it is silent as the grave.

Dorcas makes it to her and James' room and pauses outside the door, listening. Inside it's silent. Pretending that doesn't scare her, she pushes down the handle and steps in.

The curtains are closed and the air is thick and muggy. It smells of black mould, which has recently started growing against the wall where Mary's mattress used to be. Dorcas squints and can make out a lump under the blankets beneath the window, unmoving.

"I'm opening the curtains," she warns, closing the door behind her.

James lets out a faint groan. "Ugh."

"Opening on five."

"Don't."

Dorcas does not wait for five. She steps over James and pulls the curtains wide, letting what blotchy daylight there is slip in. The glare hits the cabinet and the crack in the wall behind it, black rubbish bags full of letters bulging from the space in the drywall. On the mattress, James is curled under the quilt with only the top of his head visible, buzzcut starting to grow out.

“Not up yet, I see,” she says, sighing.

“I brushed my teeth and shit,” James replies, muffled.

Dorcas sits down on the mattress beside him. “Watch shift was fine, before you ask. The shield they put up is holding. They’re trying to corral the fire around the east end. Obliviating the muggle authorities who do show up, but that won’t last long. They’ve already killed a handful.”

“Don’t tell me that,” James pleads.

Dorcas pokes him. She lies down. “Give me some room.”

James lifts the edge of the blanket up. She shuffles under it, ducking her head into the warm darkness. They stare at one another. Nested, burrowed away from the rest of the world. His knobbly knees dig into hers, drawn up.

“Glad you’re okay,” he whispers.

“Yeah,” Dorcas replies. “Yeah. I’m okay.”

James coughs harshly, squeezing his eyes shut. His arms are wrapped tightly around his stomach and he can’t raise one to strike against his sternum. Dorcas reaches a hand around him and rests it against the bony ladder of his spine, feeling the press of his ribs against the skin of his back. Pats a bit, not sure what to do.

He hacks harder still, almost barking. It’s a burst-tire wheezing noise, horribly deflated. “F-Fuck,” he manages to force out, between gasps.

“You’re okay,” Dorcas promises. She pushes James close enough that his forehead is a few inches from her shoulder.

They breathe in the same air. "Calm down. You're fine. You're fine."

She's so tired of lying. Tired, mostly, of being good at it. Dorcas has never been a good liar but she's found that they come easier than ever before now. She's almost glad that Mary didn't live long enough to change like that, as morbid as the thought is. She's becoming someone she isn't. The realisation is traitorous. Even now, here with her fingers pressing the battlement of James' shoulder blade against the palm, Marlene's ghost is lying beside her, hands around her neck.

"You're fine," Dorcas says again. "Just breathe."

He's been getting worse and worse. This is one of the less explosive coughing fits he's had in the past few days. Most of them involve at least a little blood. Like something in there is leaking.

"Sorry," James inhales. He chokes on spit. "Sorry." And he exhales as slowly as he can, throat convulsing like he's going to be sick. His eyes are still squeezed shut.

Dorcas pulls off his glasses and pushes a hand out from under the blankets to slide them away across the floor. And still she is holding his shoulder.

"That's it," she says, not knowing what she's encouraging.

When eventually James manages to get his breath back, the coughing dying down to a periodic rattle, he finally opens his eyes, peering at her through the gloom, gaze unfocused.

"So they're moving east?" he asks after a moment.

“Jesus Christ,” Dorcas snorts. Despite herself, she laughs. “I hate you. God, I hate you. So much.”

James laughs a bit too, though it’s tentative, like he’s scared he won’t be able to get the breath back. “I want to know all the news,” he says.

“There isn’t much,” Dorcas says, and then realises her faux pas. She opens her mouth to say it and finds that she can’t get the words out.

He watches her warily. “What’s happened?”

Dorcas grinds her front teeth together until they feel strange and out of place. She considers carefully how to proceed.

“There was an attack,” she murmurs. “North end. I wasn’t there.”

“Oh.”

“Death eaters.”

“I know that,” James says. “Who’s...?”

“A few.”

He stares at her, eyes huge. “Tell me.”

“Caradoc,” Dorcas whispers, as if saying it quietly will make it any less real. “Moody. And, uh, Mullholand, too.”

“Oh.” James doesn’t seem to process it. “*Oh.*”

Dorcas nods. If there’s been one person looking out for them since March, all through the New War, it’s been

Caradoc. And just like that he's gone. It feels like losing an anchor, as if they have both been set adrift.

"Oh," James says again. He curls his knees up tighter, looking very lost.

"It was a random attack," Dorcas says quickly. "Nothing... nothing to do with..." *With the delivery service. With our self-imposed radio silence. With this great tumbling mess you have made of us.*

He nods stiffly. "You're sure they're dead?"

"Aves told me."

"Maybe she lied."

Dorcas sighs. "Please don't make this hard," she whispers.

"But maybe she did."

"It wasn't just her. Everyone's... everyone's..."

James nods stiffly. "I get it," he says. "You don't need to... I get it."

They lapse into silence. Dorcas lets go of his shoulder and they sit with knees pressed together, staring at each other. James has looked for days now as if everything he glances at might be a predator, ready to attack. He still looks like that now.

"Shit," he whispers.

"Shit," Dorcas agrees.

"There's something you're not telling me."

“Nothing you don’t already know.”

“I don’t know many things.”

Dorcas sighs. “It’ll upset you.” And if there’s one thing she thinks could make her feel worse today, it would be upsetting him.

“Tell me anyway,’ James prompts.

“Aves talked to me. She said... she said she thinks they’re trying to starve us out. She thinks they’ll herd the fire around the whole city. They know we can’t apparate out. Any day now all the muggles will have evacuated. They know we won’t leave. They’re using it--”

“To take the city,” James says. “I know. One of the letters...” He trails off.

“You read some?”

“A few.”

Dorcas hesitates. “You shouldn’t,” she mutters.

“I thought you would want me to.”

She frowns at him. “You’re not reading them so you can answer them. You’re reading them to torture yourself.”

James looks at her and then just as quickly he looks away. He rolls onto his back, face pressing up against the underside of the quilt cover, which is in need of a wash.

“I know,” he mutters. “I just... hey, at least the PO box will stop receiving mail soon. Since the post will stop delivering into London. We might get a chance to... chance to...”

“Sort through months-old mail? It won’t help now.”

“I thought you wanted— you want—”

“James,” Dorcas snaps. And she no longer feels like she should be soft towards him. “Nobody’s writing anymore. I went to the box on the way—” And she buried a hand into her jacket and pulls out two letters, wadded together, both folded down the middle. She pushes them into his chest.

James stares. “That’s all there was?” he asks, aghast.

“It’s December,” Dorcas says. She feels her throat fill. She’s terrified she’ll cry so she pushes it back, pushes it down, until she can’t taste it anymore. “It’s December. It’s been months. October, at least, since we answered anything. It’s finished. Nobody writes anymore.”

James stares at the letters in his hands. In a rush he pushes the blanket off himself, scrambling up to sit. The disconnected halves of his chest grind against each other. He sits back against the radiator and with shaking hands he rips the first open, pulling the letter out.

His eyes dart across the page. “It’s from a student,” he murmurs. “Second year Gryffindor. Wants to know what happened to *Direct Action*. Misses her dad.”

Dorcas sits up too. She presses her back to the cold, hard ridges of the radiator and snaps, “What’s the other one? James. Open it.”

She’s not sure why she’s so furious all of a sudden. She’s been like this often recently. Pushing him and then pulling him back like she can twist him into a different shape if she does it enough.

James tears open the top of the second missive. He scans it.

“Slovakian,” he whispers. “They can’t find the sanctuary in Rostock. Said we were the only ones they could— they could write to. They remembered our address from the radio. Oh, fuck.”

“No point replying to that one,” Dorcas says. “They might be dead already by now. God. Fucking— god.”

James drops the letters, looking like he’s going to be sick.

“Shit,” he whispers.

“Yeah.”

“Yeah.”

Dorcas folds her hands in her lap and watches the opposite wall, where mould is stretching dark fingers across the plaster and yellowed paint of the only safe place they’ve got left. All of the anger leaves her and suddenly, she feels so guilty that she’s not quite sure it’s a human thing, more animal than person. Like she’s committed a sort of cardinal sin.

“Fuck,” James murmurs. He drops his head back against the metal with a soft, resounding clang that Dorcas feels in her spine. “I’m sorry. You have to tell— tell him I’m sorry.”

“Don’t say that,” Dorcas says quickly. “Don’t.”

“I mean it. He helped build it— you have to tell Lily, too. God, I fucked it up.”

“You did,” she agrees. She grabs James by the wrist. “But you’re staying. And we’re going to keep moving.”

He turns to look at her. “Moving where?”

The statement bears an ugly silence. James already knows, Dorcas can tell, that neither of them is going to flee the city. They have both been the deserted. They’re not leaving anything behind; Dorcas isn’t sure that either of them has the capacity.

“I don’t know,” Dorcas says after a moment. “I don’t— I don’t know, James. But we’re not— you’re not leaving.”

“Of course I’m not.”

“I don’t mean it like that. You’re not dying.”

“Of course I’m not,” he says again.

Dorcas lets a frustrated sound escape her. “Fuck you,” she says. “I just wish you’d—”

There’s the sound of something against the door. It takes Dorcas a moment to register it as a knock. It’s been months since anybody came knocking for them.

James freezes up beside her. They exchange glances.

“Come in?” Dorcas calls.

The door slides open. Frank Longbottom sticks his head in. His eyes are very bloodshot.

He forces a faint smile. “Wanted to check in on you both,” he says. “Make sure you’re alright.”

Dorcas doesn't know Frank very well. She gets the impression he's trying and failing to support people more than he's able to. An introvert-turned-group therapist. And that'll probably get worse now that Caradoc's dead.

"We're fine," James says shakily.

Dorcas realises they both must look sort of pathetic, sitting together against the radiator with their arms around their knees. "Yeah," she agrees quickly. "Yeah, we're fine."

Frank nods, looking very hard like he's trying to appear understanding. "Yeah, of course," he murmurs. "Big shock, isn't it."

"Yeah," James says.

"Yeah," Dorcas echoes.

"Yeah," Frank agrees with himself. He clears his throat. "We're always here if- if either of you wants to talk about anything. None of this is easy. And you're the youngest we've got..." He trails off. "And. Well. Everything with the letters--"

"Muggle post system's gone loopy," James blurts.

"Nobody's mailing anymore," Dorcas rushes at the same time.

They both glance at each other. Dorcas looks back at Frank and he's got an odd look on his face.

"Yeah," he says. "Yeah, of course. Uh. Moody was on the case about that..." He trails off. "Well. We'll get someone else on it."

"No rush," Dorcas says.

"Yeah," James tags on. "We know everyone's busy."

Frank slumps slightly against the door. He rubs his face between the eyes. For a moment, Dorcas thinks he's going to start shouting at them.

Instead, he takes a long breath and says, "I'm really sorry. If it's worth anything."

"Oh," Dorcas says, uncomfortable. "Uh, no, it's-- it's fine. We're fine."

"No, really." He looks truly hurt now. "I should talk to Minerva about getting you both on the next train west... Wales, maybe. We could get you to stay with, what's his name. Lupin. Or... or you could go with the muggle evacuees, it wouldn't be that hard to sort out--"

"No!" James and Dorcas both exclaim at the same moment.

"No," Dorcas cuts in. "No, we're-- we're not leaving. We can't go now."

"The more people leave, the less the Order's got to hold the fort," James agrees, and has the good sense to look sheepish as he does; it's not like he's doing any of the helping. But like hell is Dorcas going to let him go and leave her here.

"Yeah," Dorcas agrees. She shakes her head furiously. "We're not going anywhere. We're young but this is our war as much as it's yours."

"Yeah," James says. He sounds vindicated then. "Padfoot's Army's been doing this since before the Rosier Wedding.

We're not going."

Frank looks very sad. "You just... I just..." And he trails off. "You tell me if you change your mind. Alright? It's still not too late to get you out of here."

"We're not done fighting yet," James says, and then breaks off into a harsh coughing fit.

Dorcas rubs his back with one hand. "He's fine," she tells Frank.

Looking very uncomfortable and not quite like he believes it, Frank nods slowly. He clears his throat. "We're downstairs if you want to come be around the others. You shouldn't be alone right now. We're trying to stay positive. There's drink to share. I'm sure nobody would mind..."

"Thanks," James wheezes.

"Thank you," Dorcas mumbles.

Frank steps out, closing the door behind him. James curls around his stomach and coughs and coughs until Dorcas is sure he'll spit up his tongue.

"Fuck," he says.

"You're fine," Dorcas mutters. Determinedly, almost. Not really. And she rests across his back, arms folded over him. "You're okay."

James rattles beneath her like an engine. Not as warm as that. "Yeah," he chokes. "Yeah. 'Course."

Marlene,

~~*I thought of you a bit today. A bit more than usual, that is.
And it's like you're just*~~

"One of the rescued wishes to speak with you," McGonagall says the moment Dorcas has walked into the kitchen the following morning.

Dorcas blinks. "Who-- why would--"

"Not you, Miss Meadowes," McGonagall clarifies. She gestures behind Dorcas. "You, Potter."

Standing behind her, James startles. "Me?"

"Is there another Potter here?" McGonagall seems to realise what she's said, because she coughs and shakes her head. "Someone will take you up to see him."

"I'm going with him," Dorcas says quickly.

McGonagall doesn't seem like she's inclined to stop her. She nods once.

James hovers in the doorway. "Can we go up now, then?"

"Sit," McGonagall instructs. She needs only say one word.

Dorcas and James shuffle to the long table, sitting down as far from McGonagall as they can get. The fireplace is still unlit and it's perpetually freezing throughout HQ, no matter where you stand, a stark contrast to the slushy, oppressively humid chill outside.

Today is the first day in some time that Dorcas hasn't had a morning watch shift for. For once, she managed to convince James to come down and eat with her. He's a mess, wearing

a pair of her trousers with the belt on the last hole and with his spiky outgrown hair a mess, sticking up haphazardly. And it's just their luck, Dorcas supposes, that half the Order is down here today, more than reasonably should be in the kitchen in the morning.

Nobody's speaking much. Someone passes Dorcas a plate of soft-boiled eggs still in their shells and Dorcas takes one and passes one to James. They begin cracking open their own in silence, heads bowed, elbows knocking together. In every direction there lies a dour face. Frank, sitting nearby, still looks like he's been crying. Alice is perched on a broken stool beside him holding his hand.

"Still nothing new, then?" someone asks James. An auror Dorcas doesn't know by name.

James glances up, fingers buried halfway under the shell of his egg. "Uh," he says.

Dorcas resolves herself not to answer for him. He can deal with this one, she tells herself.

"Well," James says. "Um."

"We've got a few," Dorcas speaks up. "We got a letter from a Slovakian runaway. Struggling to find the Rostock Sanctuary. There's not much we can do for them but we're going to write back if we can."

"Yeah," James says quickly. "And a girl in Hogwarts who misses her dad. He hasn't written, we checked. We're going to try to make sure she doesn't lose sleep over it. Uh. Y'know."

An awkward murmur of assent skitters down the table. Most people don't look up.

James nudges Dorcas' foot with his under the table. She kicks him.

They eat slowly and quietly, neither speaking. Nobody asks them anything again. Dorcas can feel the mistrust, though, without even having to look up and meet the stares. She knows people are watching them. This is something she's never felt before, not even while she was stuck in occupied Hogwarts, being hexed and beaten every few days, scared for her life more than not. Because at least then she had the Gryffindors. This feels like being alone in a snakepit. James offers little comfort.

"I'll show them up," Fabian Prewett mutters eventually, when the tension is too thick to bear much longer. He stands up and his hair screeches. "Come on."

He looks terrible. He's recently buzzed most of his red hair, and he's got dark, heavy bags beneath his eyes. James and Dorcas both stand up, Dorcas taking the lead. They follow Fabian from the room.

"Christ," someone breathes as they go. Neither of them looks back.

Fabian leads them upstairs and through the picky darkness to the handful of spare rooms on the first floor. He doesn't speak to either of them and Dorcas gets the distinct impression that it bothers James a lot. He looks sort of devastated when she catches his eye as they round the corner.

They pull to a stop before a door at the end of the narrow hallway. The lightbulb fixed into the ceiling above is shattered.

“Alright.” Fabian turns to look them both over. “Be... gentle. Alright? He’s from the Barnet stronghold. One of the only ones we got out of there alive. No idea why he wants to talk to you--” He frowns heavily at James. “I’ve half a mind to stay and hear him out, honestly.”

“I’ll deal with it,” Dorcas pipes up.

He gives her a strange look, then sighs. “Go on, then. He’s got the bed against the back wall.” And he pushes the door open and lets them inside.

The room inside is significantly larger than Dorcas and James’, long and rectangular with two windows. Someone has managed to expand it magically, though not by a large degree, and without much skill; the walls are distorted in places, stretched out of their textures, a handful of the damp stains across the ceiling repeated twice in mirrors patterns where their expanses have been duplicated.

There are eight conjured cots inside, all iron-framed and none of them looking particularly comfortable. They’ve all got the soft-edged temporality of summoned furniture; they don’t quite catch the light right, and it feels like they might disappear at any moment. There are a handful of strangers sitting on beds, some sharing. Talking and playing cards, a small circle of them. Some sitting and reading.

They all look haggard and ill. Unkempt, like they’re in need of a haircut or a bath. And almost everyone in the room twitches when Dorcas steps in; she gets a handful of wide-eyed stares.

“Uh.” She coughs and peers around until she finds the bed Fabian mentioned, right in the back. She grabs James by the wrist.

They pick their way around beds through the room, both staring around. It's a different world in here than the rest of HQ. Someone has charmed the windows so it looks sunny outside, not ashy with the heat of fiendfyre making all the panes rattle. Dorcas finds herself wishing she and James' room looked like this.

The furthestmost bed from the door is hard to see at first over the heads of a group sitting on the bed in front. Dorcas steps around them gingerly, trying to ignore how they shuffle out of her way, and peers down.

The man under the covers, propped up with four or five pillows, looks older than anybody she's ever met. Old enough that his face has started to sink into itself like a skull, like you'd imagine a corpse would.

And she recognises him.

James seems to choke a bit. "Ollivander?" he asks tentatively.

The dead thing in the bed stirs a bit. It opens its eyes. Black and sunken. It stares around until it finds James.

"You—" And Ollivander coughs. "You. James Potter."

James smiles sheepishly. "That's me, uh, sir."

"Mahogany. Eleven inches. Pliable."

"Um. Yes, sir."

Ollivander pries a wizened hand from under the blankets. He takes James' wrist. "Sit down, please, dear boy. Sit."

Dorcas, feeling like a misplaced houseplant, finds them both plastic lawnchair-like seats to sit in. James shuffles close to the bedside, holding the old man's hand between both of his own. He looks transfixed.

"What can I do, sir?" he asks. Dorcas has never seen him so polite.

Ollivander watches him with those black eyes for a long, ugly moment. "You live here? With... Dumbledore's people?"

"Yes, sir."

"You must leave. Soon. Now."

A chill runs down Dorcas' spine. Before James can answer, she cuts in. "Why?"

James glances at her, then echoes, more gently, "...why is that?"

Ollivander is still watching him intently, scanning James' face. "You are in danger," he murmurs, throat squeaking like unoiled machinery. "You are unsafe so long as you are where he can reach you."

"He doesn't know where we are," James protests.

"He will," Ollivander says gravely.

"I... I can't go, sir."

"I understand your loyalty to the—"

"You don't understand," James butts in. "Sorry. Sorry to interrupt. But you don't understand. I... why me? We're all in danger."

“He’s hunting for you.”

“Yes,” James says, “but he’s hunting for most of my friends.”

“And you in particular.”

James pauses. “You know why,” he says, sounding something between startled and hungry.

Dorcas touches his arm with the tips of her fingers. “James,” she murmurs.

James doesn’t look at her. “It’s about Sirius, isn’t it?” he asks. “Sirius Black. He wants me so he can—”

“No,” Ollivander puts in. “Dear boy, no.” He looks away from James and to the false window. “It’s about you.”

“James,” Dorcas says again. She’s got that doom feeling again. Like dementors; like nothing is ever going to be okay again.

“What about me?!” James demands. He squeezes Ollivander’s hands tightly. “Tell me. Please.”

Ollivander blinks slowly at him, like he’s half asleep. But his eyes are intensely awake.

“A month after the incident in Little Hangleton,” he says, “Voldemort himself came to my shop in Diagon Alley. I had only recently been released from death eater custody and he re-captured me, and...” And he trails off.

James shuffles his chair forward a bit and it squeaks against the floor. “You don’t have to talk about it,” he murmurs, in a voice that clearly says, *please talk about it*.

Ollivander looks at the ceiling. There is an old, biting pain in his face. Dorcas didn't know that look before the New War but she knows it now as well as she knows the sight of her own fists.

"He was scared," he whispers. "Scared that his wand no longer obeyed him. And he was right. It did not. Its allegiance belongs to another."

"Who?!" James demands.

And then he goes stiff and one of his hands lifts, lifts. He touches his injured chest and runs his fingers down the broken-out ridge of it.

"I disarmed him," he whispers. "That day."

"What?!" Dorcas demands.

James looks at her, eyes very wild. "I disarmed Voldemort," he says again. "I took his wand. Ohhh fuck."

"In Little Hangleton?"

"Yeah. Expelliarmus."

"Shit."

"I know. Shit."

Dorcas grabs his arm very tightly. "You're a maniac," she says.

"Yeah, well," James replies. "I had to get him back for this." He digs his fingernails into the ridge of his chest. "Didn't I?"

"It's no excuse for-- for--" *Leaving me? Angering him?*

In the bed, Ollivander clears his throat. "He learned, much the same as you are. His wand, it once belonged to another. He won it. And you have won it again."

James is silent for a moment, eyes narrowed. He drums his foot across the floor, squinting. "If someone else had disarmed me," he mutters. "If someone else had taken my wand, it would belong to them. His wand would be theirs. Has anybody...?"

Dorcas shakes her head. "You don't take your wand out with you anymore," she says. "Let alone use it. Nobody's disarmed you."

"Shit." James rubs his face. "Oh, shit. God, Sirius, forgive me."

Sirius isn't here to forgive you, Dorcas doesn't say. Instead, she turns to look at Ollivander, peering at the old man. "He thinks if he kills James it'll yield to him again?"

"Yes. I believe so."

"But James-- James said. James said he doesn't need a wand to hurt people."

Ollivander's face goes dark. "Certain wandmakers," he says stiffly, "are rather more liberal than others with the... extent to which they will..." And he trails off again.

"Please, go on," Dorcas says, quite pointedly.

Ollivander coughs. "The modifications made to his arm," he says, "are... conditional. One cannot use that power when afraid."

"And he is afraid?"

A terse nod. "Yes." Ollivander squeezes James' hands. "Yes, he is afraid."

Afraid of James. Afraid of Sirius. Afraid of a powerlessness he has never known. No wonder he's been hiding away. It brings Dorcas a sick sort of pleasure to imagine him cowering.

James stands up in a rush. "I need to-- I have to--" And he stumbles away from his chair towards the door.

"James!" Dorcas calls after him. She stands too. "Sorry, sir, uh. Mr. Ollivander. Sorry."

"He must leave," Ollivander tells her. "He must. He--"

"I heard you," Dorcas replies uncomfortably, perhaps a touch irritably. "I know that. Now if you'll excuse me, I-- I have to go." And she steps away from the bed and the man in it and slips from the room after James.

Out in the hallway, she catches a glimpse of him disappearing up the stairs and hears his feet pound up them and to the upper floor. Dorcas gives him a minute, waiting until she hears the distant slamming of their bedroom door, before creeping up after him in the settled dust of his panic.

Dorcas makes it to the bedroom door. As she always does, she hovers for a moment, listening. No incessant *reparo*. Just silence and the shuffling of blankets.

She presses her ear to the wood. "Can I come in?" she calls softly.

A pause. "Please don't," James' muffled voice calls.

Dorcas sighs and pushes the door open. “You know the asking is just a formality,” she says. “Oh, James.”

Curled up against the radiator, he looks up at her with reddened eyes, the picture of misery.

“Fuck,” he says. He pauses. “We read his diaries.”

Dorcas stares. “What?”

“We read his diaries,” James repeats. “The three of us. Remus and Lily and I.”

“Whose?”

“Sirius’.”

“Oh.”

James shrugs once, a jerky movement. It seems evoked far more by pain than nonchalance. “We snuck into his old house and found them and read them. It was sort of nice. Seeing his words. But he talked— he talked— *Riddle*. He would have nightmares about him. Write about how he would die one of these days. We read that.”

“Oh,” Dorcas says again. With one foot, she kicks the door closed, but doesn’t approach.

He nods. “It was like he was a different person,” he murmurs. “In those diaries. A different person to the Sirius I knew. And I think about it every day. How much he must have hurt him—”

His voice chokes up a bit. Dorcas wonders whether to say something comforting.

"I wonder if he knew," James forces out. "I... fuck. Fucking. I don't know. He... and I think I'm going to do it."

The resolve that sentence comes with throws Dorcas off. "What?" she asks. "You lost me."

"I'm going to do it," James repeats, like it should be obvious.

Dorcas gesticulates between them. "You're going to have to explain it to me."

He chews on his lip. She gets the impression he doesn't want to talk about it.

"I," James says eventually. "I. It's obvious isn't it? He wants me. And I've got this over on him. The one thing we have that he needs. We've got a bargaining chip."

Dorcas stares. "You've been wanted for months."

"Yeah, but we know I'm really, really important to him now. That he'd be willing to give something up." James stares at the floor. "This could solve all of our problems."

"James," Dorcas says in a low voice. She holds her hands out in front of her like she's trying to calm an animal.

"James, I know that voice." She knows it better than she would like to admit. It's the voice he uses when he's about to throw someone's life away.

James shakes his head, still not looking at her properly.

"It would work," he whispers. "Get him to put out the fire and hand me over in return."

"NO!"

“It makes sense!” James exclaims. “I’d be fixing what I started— letters, you could sort the letters, get the others to help. Get them sent off again. We could get London back.”

“No!” Dorcas shouts again. She hurtles across the room and to James and grabs him by the front of his sweatshirt and shakes him. “No. No. No. You fucking idiot, no. No! Of course not!”

“It makes sense!” he says. “They’re struggling to control the fire as it is, if they put it out they wouldn’t want to start another. The muggles could come back. It would make it harder for them to occupy the city. The Order could reach people again, get its allies back— without me, the mailing service would be fine—“

“You think he would keep his word?!” Dorcas demands. “For a moment, do you think he would?”

“If we made him, he would,” James explains. He looks up at her properly, eyes sort of manic. “I know him. From those diaries. I know him. You don’t know how well I know how his brain works. He’d do anything to get power back. Anything. There isn’t a limit to how far he’d go, being powerless terrifies him—“

“So giving him his magic back would make the war easier to win?!” Dorcas demands. “You’re being so fucking obtuse—“

“He’s a man!” James shouts. “This is a city!”

“You don’t talk about him like he’s a man! And he would box us in either way. We wouldn’t get the upper hand—“

“Muggles have died! Died, because of me, the fire I started, they’re dead—“

“We started it!” Dorcas spits. “We did. Us. It was us. Stop fucking— stop it— stop—”

James takes her by the wrists and squeezes tight, too tight, it sort of hurts. “Everything would be fixed,” he says. “The delivery service, the fire. The city. And— and it would work. It’s the leverage we need. I’ve been dead weight for months, look at me—”

“Shut up!” Dorcas cries. “Just stop, just— stop trying to act like this moral. Stop it. You’re not doing this because you want to win the war, don’t give me that shit; you want an easy way out, you want them to find out when you’re not here— you want to die a fucking hero, James Potter, I hate you. I hate you.”

“You’re not doing this for moral reasons either,” James snaps. He scowls openly at her, the wondrous hysteria of the idea fading. “You’re not— you’re— you just don’t want to be alone, you’re scared if I go you’ll be the only one left— and for your information, I don’t care if I die a hero--”

“Shut your mouth—”

“At least I’m not the one throwing away the only leverage we’ve got! Because, because, because I don’t want to have no friends!”

“It’s not that!” Dorcas shouts. “God, fuck you, damn you, damn you to hell. Throw your life away, see if I care—”

James squares his jaw. “I will,” he declares. “And it’ll help, it’ll help—”

“You don’t care whether it helps.”

“And apparently neither do you!”

“Then where does that leave us!” Dorcas demands.

“I DON’T KNOW!” James hurls at her. It’s so loud it rattles the window. He sobs once.

Dorcas falls back onto her haunches. She lets go of his shirt.

James lets out a pathetic little cough and wipes his face.

“Fuck,” she says. “Fuck, James.”

“I know,” James says. “It’ll... it’ll be worth something. Right? It’ll help us... somehow...” But he sounds less certain now.

And Dorcas does something she thinks she may come to regret.

“James,” she says, businesslike. “James.” And she takes him by the shoulders and shakes him until he looks at her.

“Yeah?” he asks softly.

“You remember the diaries.”

“Yeah.”

“How scared he was. Being... being you-know-who’s captive.”

James nods once. “Of course,” he mutters. “I’ve still got them somewhere.”

Dorcas chews her lip. “How do you think Sirius would feel if he knew you were in the same position?” she asks.

He blinks at her. “Well of course he wouldn’t like it, but... but... the war, Dorcas.”

"This isn't about war anymore. Neither of us is doing this for the war. You're doing it for him."

"Not just him."

"Would Remus take it any better?"

"Lily, too," James mutters. "And you."

"And would either of us like it? To hear that he'd killed you? To know you died alone?" Dorcas shakes her head slowly. "It would kill him, James."

In the back of her mind, Marlene whispers, *god, you are a terrible person.*

James falters. "He and Remus."

"They'd die without you. They love you too much."

"Bullshit."

"I mean it."

"Stop lying to try to get what you want," he snaps.

Dorcas shakes her head. She leans over to James and hugs him very tightly, probably too tightly; she hears him creak as if made of metal. Slowly, he reaches up to hug her back. They end up sort of sprawled on top of each other against the cold iron of the radiator.

"You can't go," she whispers. "You can't." *If anybody else leaves me I don't know if there'll be anything of me left behind.*

"But I should."

“But you can’t.”

“I want to,” James admits in a small voice.

Dorcas pulls away. “But you won’t,” she says. “You can’t.”

He hesitates. “Okay,” he says eventually.

“That’s the truth?”

“Yeah.”

Dorcas isn’t sure how much she believes it. “Promise me.”

James looks her full in the face. He coughs again. “I promise,” he rasps. “I promise. I won’t go.”

Chapter End Notes

- [Official Tumblr](#)
- [Twitter Quotes Bot](#) (admin: [lupinlesbian](#))
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WINTER

Chapter Notes

oh man. wild one. keep an eye out for small details!

a quick announcement: JPDS HAS A PODFIC! my wonderful talented friends are pulling it together! you can find it linked in the related works section at the bottom. go check it out! two chapters are out so far and it's going to update weekly!

warnings for blood, injury, mild gore, violence, and a relatively graphic (short) section of an animal being physically attacked in a manner that could be distressing.

enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Regulus is awake and leaning against the hood of the car when Marlene wakes up. Less leaning and more sitting; he's got one leg crossed over the other and he's staring out over the lake, smoking a cigarette he probably stole from her.

Marlene blinks into the blue-hour morning light, trying to clear the sleep from her vision. Her mind clings to the tapered edges of a fading dream. The strange, ghostly impression of Mary's face against the sky. The hot parturition pain of a slap. She's not sure what scared her in that but it was certainly a nightmare; her heart is running like there is death on its heels.

“Shit,” she mutters, and drags her hands over her face. Her mouth feels furry and bitter. She needs to brush her teeth. She pushes open the door.

Outside, it’s bitterly cold. Early December in Olomouc aches with wind; this far into the continent, it feels surprisingly similar to being by the ocean. Never stagnant, the land itself seems always wandering. Regulus has been uneasy for days. They’ve been in the Czech Republic for not even a week at this point and it feels like far too long.

Marlene crunches through the frozen grass to sit on the hood beside him. He left a space for her, though she’s not sure why; he never welcomes her company.

“Alright?” she asks around a thick tongue.

Regulus yawns, exhaling smoke. He shoves the fag to his lips again and takes a long drag. “Yeah,” he says.

“That’s mine.”

“I like to think we’re mature enough to share.”

“We’re mature enough to share,” Marlene says, “when I’m dead and you take my shit and sell it. Give me that.”

She takes the rollie and smokes it down to the stub. Regulus doesn’t try to get it back. They sit in silence, breaths silver and ashy in the clear, cold air. It’s snowing along the tips of the far-flung mountains. They stand like ghosts against the dark morning. The lake they’ve parked alongside is a bit offroad, out of the way of the lane through the hills to their west. The world is composed mostly of black trees and the clear steely sheet of the lake, and in the distance, the way they came, the cleft of the northern ranges.

When Marlene is done with the rollie, Regulus shuffles up to sit fully on the hood and leans back and back until the sutured curve of his head rests against the windscreen. He looks up at the sky. The whistling wind across the water ruffles his hair up around his face and makes it hard to see his eyes.

“Well,” he sighs. “Today’s the day.”

“It hasn’t been long enough.”

“They never replied to us, did they? No point splitting food three ways anymore.”

“Here I was,” Marlene says. She lies back beside him.

“Thinking they had bleeding hearts.”

“They’ve got to be pragmatic. If he’s not their man, they don’t care.”

“Didn’t even announce that he’s alive on that fucking radio show.”

“Been offline for weeks.”

“Still.”

Regulus shrugs. “He’s of no use to us now.”

“I mean, bodies sell for a lot on the black market.”

“Oh, right. We can put an ad in the paper.”

“Shut up,” Marlene says. She elbows him right in the top of the ribs where it hurts. Regulus balls up his fist with his thumb tucked under his fingers so the first two knuckles stick out and he digs them into the side of her neck. They tussel until the car starts rocking and then tear away from

each other, Marlene nursing a tender throat, Regulus wiping blood out of his ear.

"Fuck you," he says. "I was just pointing it out."

"Well I think we're stupid for not taking any money we can get at this point. I haven't eaten in two days."

Regulus scowls at the sky. "I don't want to argue."

"Fine. Me neither."

"Of course you do. When do you ever not want to argue?"

Marlene presses her thumb into the bruising flesh of the side of her neck and digs it in until it hurts. "We could always try torturing him again," she offers.

Regulus hums. "We're not very good at it."

It's true. Torture is surprisingly difficult. They tried for a few hours a couple of nights ago, tied the weasel to a tree deep in the forest and went at it; Marlene stuck a knife in a few times mostly just to see what would happen and it didn't get anything out of him. Regulus tried suffocating him with a plastic bag he found on the shore of a nearby river. When Marlene suggested waterboarding (half as a joke), he went at her with the plastic bag instead, which was largely unpleasant, so they called it a night and gave up.

"Yeah, but, still. Nothing to lose at this point."

"Cept our time."

And god knows they don't have much of it. Marlene scoffs.

"Okay," she says. "Fine. Ready to do this, then?"

She has asked him that countless times since they first met. Regulus is probably pretty sick of hearing it.

“Yeah,” Regulus sighs. “Come on.”

They both slide off the hood. Regulus walks around the right side of the car and Marlene around the left, flicking the cigarette butt into the silver underbrush. They reach the boot around the back and stare down at it, side by side.

“Okay then,” Marlene murmurs. She pulls her knife out of her sleeve and holds it blade-down in her fist, squeezing it against her palm. “Go on.”

Regulus leans down to pop the boot open.

Mundungus Fletcher looks worse for wear. He barely stirs when the light hits him, twitching a bit. One of his watery eyes opens and he peers up at Marlene, animal terror there, but softened and siphoned by exhaustion and sickness. It is the end of the hunt and the prey inside of him knows he will be set free or eaten.

He’s curled up on his side with his ankles and wrists tied together, unable to straighten out. When they first found him he had no wand on him, and keeping him restrained has been pretty easy. He tried to strangle Regulus once, but Marlene just thought that was quite funny and didn’t see it as cause for concern, despite how Regulus’ throat is still purple all over and he looks perpetually oxygen-deprived.

The few visible wounds across Fletcher’s arms and stomach have wept. He smells of infection. The boot of this stolen car will stink for weeks.

“Alright,” Marlene says. “Roll him out.”

Regulus takes Fletcher by the front of his shirt, now torn, and hauls him over the rim of the boot, dropping him on the ground. Fletcher hits the earth with a heavy thump and groans around the wadded-up handkerchief shoved between his teeth.

Marlene kneels down beside him and pulls it out. "Listen to me," she says. "Listen— stop screaming, Merlin above. Fucking stop."

Fletcher has already begun trying to wiggle away. He's shaking furiously and looks like he's about to start crying. "Get away from me!" he shouts. "NO!"

"We're not going to kill you," Regulus says.

"Unless you piss us off," Marlene agrees. "So shut your mouth and listen."

Fletcher's huge eyes flicker between the both of them, blown wide. He tries again to wriggle back and hits the bumper.

"Shit," he heaves. He hacks up a small amount of blood, probably from a bitten tongue. "Please. Please don't."

"We're not planning on it," Marlene sighs irritably. "Here's what's going to happen. We're gonna cut your ties and leave you out here. If you can make it to the road someone'll find you. Tell 'em you're a muggle, got stolen from. A tourist, I don't care. Something believable. Move on with your life. Alright?"

Fletcher blinks at her. He looks down at his butchered form. "I can't make it that far," he wheezes. "Please. Please— how far—"

Marlene glances at Regulus.

“Uh,” Regulus says. “Two miles, maybe.”

With a terrified groan, Fletcher begins to shake harder. “Please,” he sobs. “Please, I can’t make it— please—”

He tries flexing his tied hands out towards Marlene. He looks grotesque with his tear-stained red face and bloody teeth.

“Don’t touch me,” Marlene snaps. “We don’t owe you shit.”

“Maybe he’s right,” Regulus murmurs. “We could just— just leave him on the side of the road.”

“He’s lying. Look.”

Marlene reaches out and, without precision, pushes her knife beneath the ropes around Fletcher’s wrists. She slashes them free, followed by those around his swollen feet. Then she straightens up.

“Walk,” she commands.

Fletcher straightens out to lie face-down on the ground, face buried in the earth. He groans, blood returning to his blue extremities. One of his twisted hands digs into the dirt and he seems to deflate into it as if decomposing.

“Guh,” he says, panting.

“Marlene,” Regulus says.

“Don’t,” Marlene replies. She jabs Fletcher with the toe of her boot. “Walk,” she says again. “*Walk.*”

Fletcher buries his other hand in the ground and tries to drag himself forwards. He makes it a few inches before collapsing with a sharp groan.

“He won’t make it two miles,” Regulus sighs. “Come on. Let’s just take him up to the road and leave him there.”

“Please,” Fletcher gasps. “Please...”

“No fucking point,” Marlene says. “Come on. If he dies out here it’s not our loss. Let’s drive.”

Regulus straightens up and looks her in the face, chin upturned. Wind brushes through the hollow and Marlene tries not to shiver with it. She watches him right back. Regulus chews his blue lip between his teeth.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” he says eventually.

“Oh yeah?” Marlene asks, more annoyed now. “This is miles out, nobody comes out here.”

“If someone finds a body— I’m just saying, they can magically trace that shit. It’s less loose ends if we let him go.”

“He can tattle.”

“Look at him.” Regulus kicks Fletcher in the guts for emphasis.

Marlene raises an imperious eyebrow. “You’re getting soft,” she tells Regulus.

He snorts and looks away. “Or maybe you’re just being reckless,” he replies promptly.

"We don't owe him shit. It's not my problem that you've not got the stomach for it," Marlene spits.

"I just think leaving more bodies behind us than necessary might not be a good idea."

"Liar."

Regulus shrugs once. "So what if I am. I don't want to kill a wizard if we don't have to. What of it?"

"Don't tell me you've grown a conscience now," Marlene laughs, trying to sound as derisive as she can. "I don't believe that."

"It's not a conscience." Regulus glances around into the dark trees. "Call it a hunch."

Marlene grabs him by the shoulders. She pushes her nails in until she's sure it hurts. "We're leaving him here," she says. "That's final."

Regulus looks startlingly human for a moment. Still tinged grey and blue, even now, with his face hatched by small cuts and bruises. He looks at Marlene like she's said something very stupid.

Then, the apathy returns. He shakes her off. "Fine."

"We're in agreement?" Not that it matters.

Regulus nods once. "Yes," he says. "We'll leave him."

"Good." Marlene steps back, looking around. She takes in the cool, spoiled hues of the lightening sky above. "Let's get out of here. I think we can hit Polish border in a few more days, if we step on it and preserve gas."

Regulus steps away from the body too. They start towards the front of the car.

“You should just run over him,” he mutters to Marlene as they reach the doors on either side of the Morris Marina. “Put him out of his misery.”

“Ha,” she says. “You’re evil.”

“I learned it from you,” Regulus snorts. He opens his door and climbs inside.

Marlene peers out over the lake one last time, sure there’s something she’s forgetting. She feels like that most of the time, though. There’s a hungering fear born of a father of war and a mother of greed setting root inside her ribs and she doesn’t imagine it’ll ever leave. She is more often than not looking for something to bite.

Wind ripples across the surface of the broad lake. Its silver monolith rings with faraway silence. She imagines she wouldn’t survive long in a place as peaceful as this.

“Basilisk fang!” Fletcher calls from around the back of the car. *“It was basilisk fang!”*

Marlene goes dead still. “Huh,” she says, and the cold wind whisks it away.

Regulus opens his door and sticks his head out. “Did he shout something?”

“Oh yeah,” Marlene says. She sets her jaw. “Yep.”

Fletcher is still screaming. Marlene slogs back around the car to him and leans down to grab him by his shirt. She

turns him over in her hands and she slams him up against the back wheel until she feels his shoulder crunch.

“Repeat that?” she asks sweetly.

He sobs, shaking in her fingers. “Basilisk fang,” he cries. “It’s what I was selling. It was my job to get rid of it. Give it to someone who could destroy it. But it’s— it’s so valuable—and I just thought— I thought he wouldn’t notice a little off the side—”

Regulus clambers out of the passenger seat. He crouches beside Marlene. “What?” he asks.

“He’s been selling basilisk fang,” Marlene says. “That’s what he stole to get him locked up. Or that’s what he says. Basilisks are fucking extinct, you clod. We’re not stupid.”

“Technically only extinct in Britain,” Regulus mutters.

“Zip,” Marlene tells him. She turns back to Fletcher. “Basilisk fang, was it? And let me guess, vials of unicorn blood on the side? Give me a break.”

“It’s true,” Fletcher sobs. “It’s true, I swear. You-know-who, he told me— he told me to— he wanted to get rid of them. Get them out of the country so nobody could access them. I figured they’d be valuable, caught me a pretty penny— and when he found out— they tortured me, tortured me for—”

“I don’t care,” Marlene says flatly, “if they tortured you. Get to the point.”

“He— he had a dead one.” Fletcher tries to pull himself together. “A dead basilisk, he had killed it somehow, it was at Hogwarts. Before the Rosier Wedding. Had a girl smuggling the teeth out. And he would pass them off to me,

I would— I would take them over the border. To destroy them. It paid well.”

“Not well enough, evidently,” Regulus scoffs.

“You’ll have to come up with a better story than that,” Marlene agrees. “Why would he want them destroyed? Basilisk fangs are poisonous, right? Doesn’t make any fucking sense.”

Regulus goes still for a moment. When Marlene looks up at him, he looks very thoughtful.

“I only sold a few,” Fletcher is heaving. “P-Please, just a few, to some potioneer in France— paid well for them— I can give you more information, I have more! Please!”

“Wasn’t even worth the torture,” Marlene snorts. “This knife would sell for more than you.”

She stands up. Beneath her, Fletcher tries to crawl to her, reaching for one of her boots. She kicks him in the face.

Regulus stands up too. He still looks lost in thought.

“Let’s go,” he says to Marlene. And then, to Fletcher, “Did you work for him regularly?”

Fletcher squints up at him through his tears. He nods once.

“Thought so,” Regulus muses. He kicks Fletcher once upside the head. Fletcher goes limp.

“If you hadn’t done it, I would’ve,” Marlene says. She pokes him in the eye with two fingers, hard. “Let’s go.”

Regulus pokes her right back. Marlene’s eyelid comes open on his ragged fingernail in a half-centimetre tear and

bleeds all day. It's annoying — she figures it'll heal on its own.

They don't run the fool over. They don't need to kill him; the cold will do it for them. They are unforgiving, both of them, but no less merciful than winter herself.

Dorcas,

You know, I'm sort of having fun with it at this point! I know I'll never send them to you so what's the point in being restrained and shit? I'm just sort of talking to myself. And Regulus. Those two are increasingly the same thing these days.

Nah, he's angry I said that already. But back to you. How are things out in fair Britain? London, I assume, at this point, unless you've been smart and gotten out of there. Word has spread about the fiendfyre. Regulus has theories, most of them stupid. He thinks it's some pureblood trying to fight back. As if there are those. Even he doesn't really care about rebellion. And likewise neither do I, but at least I can feel self-righteous if I want to. Still. Ironical that England's burning just like Europe, isn't it? Only difference is that our fires go out.

I assume you'll survive it. Maybe it's wishful thinking but I just can't see you dying out there. It would feel too uninteresting for you. You've always been more than that to me. But I might have said the same thing about Mary, once, so.

Cold as it is out here (usually freezing or below — it blows), I've done alright with it this year. Usually I'm shit with bad weather but I've been surviving it. Reg and I stole a car a while ago and we're going to abandon it soon, since I'm

sure we're being tracked (we tore off the plates, but it sort of makes us more conspicuous, doesn't it?) and I don't want to take the risk. And after that it'll be on foot, mostly, out to the Polish border. We've got a job or two lined up out there. We'll find somewhere to stay. We're going to make it to '78.

Anyway. Stay safe, or whatever.

- Marlene.

They press onwards east. The Czech Republic gets only denser with forest the further you venture from the mountainous northwest, and Marlene and Regulus drive until they run out of petrol. They argue for an hour about how to proceed. Regulus thinks they should risk stealing fuel. Marlene thinks he's a fool.

"We'll make it fine on foot," she says. "It's zero, it was like two the other day. That's not hypothermia temperatures, it's not even frostbite temperatures. It's barely nippy."

"You're fucking crazy," Regulus snaps. He burrows his blue hands into his armpits and scowls through the windscreen. They're using the last of their fuel to keep the heater on as snow piles up on the roof. The Morris is parked up alongside a crystalline river. The world is silent and still outside.

"We can layer up," Marlene says. "There can't be a town far from here. We'll just nick another car then. We're not stealing fucking petrol."

"Why the fuck not?!"

"Because—" Frustrated, she pounds a fist off the dashboard. "Because we've been stealing petrol and

kerosene since September. That'll be a way for them to track us."

"Oh, come on," Regulus sighs. "It's been a month since they got close enough to smell, they've got bigger things to deal with than us two—"

"We've caused them enough trouble, haven't we?!"

He shrugs. "I don't— I don't know! Just— listen."

"I'm listening," Marlene snarls.

"I know death eaters," Regulus says. "I know how they work. They wouldn't stoop so low as to— what? Travel around asking muggle shop owners who's been stealing? Checking people's license plates? You're fucking— you're being irrational right now. Completely irrational. If they are tracking us, it's magically, and if they were tracking us magically they would've already killed us."

"The Order, then," Marlene says defiantly. "They wouldn't be above asking muggles. In fact I bet they make an effort to. Equal opportunity politically-motivated interrogations, or what the fuck ever. I don't fucking know."

"Marlene," Regulus sighs, sounding horribly frustrated. "If all this is causing you so much stress—"

"I'm not stressed!" Marlene shouts. To emphasise this point, she curls her hands into her hair and tugs on it, feeling a bit mad. And then elbows him in the top of the chest just for emphasis.

Regulus scowls. He leans against his window for a moment before recoiling with the cold.

“Right,” he sighs after a moment. “I can tell. This is certainly not how stressed people behave. I can tell by your sickly pallor and your bloodshot eyes and your twitchy fingers and acne breakout that you’re the peak of physical and mental health right now.”

“I can tell you’re doing great too,” Marlene snaps. “I can change that, if you don’t shut up.”

“Let me steal it, then,” Regulus tries. “We’ll find a town. It’ll be in and out. You can stay in the car and watch the snow.”

“I’m not a child!”

“You’re acting like one!”

“We’re not stealing petrol,” Marlene snaps. “Another car, sure. People’s cars go missing all the time. Food, fine. But we’re leaving a trail— one of these days they’ll—”

Regulus turns to look her straight in the eye then. He’s properly scowling, a rarity for him; usually he looks at least a little derisive, as if perpetually amused by her.

“You,” he says. “*You.*”

“Use your fucking words.”

“You,” Regulus tries again, “you should just stop. I mean it.”

Marlene stares at him. “What are you saying to me,” she says more than asks.

“You should stop,” he echoes. “Just— just give it up. I can tell you’re paranoid, you’re a— a megalomaniac. Egomaniacal.”

“You don’t even know what that word means.”

“I read books too!” Regulus snaps. “And that’s not the point. It’s not— just listen to what I’m saying. Please.”

“I understand you clearly,” Marlene grits out. “Do you remember when we first met? Do you? I could’ve killed you. Put the knife up through your jaw. And I didn’t. You don’t get to tell me what I can and can’t do. Because I can take it back—”

Regulus’ hand moves in a blur. He whips his knife from his pocket and thrusts it under Marlene’s chin. She moves at the exact same moment, almost preempting it, and hurls the tip of her switchblade to his throat, holding it to the pale knot there.

“Try it,” she snaps. “You’ll come down with me.”

“I’m just concerned about you,” Regulus mocks.

“No you’re fucking not.”

Regulus sighs. He reaches up and wraps his hand around Marlene’s blade, pulling it from his throat. It draws blood on both ends from the fleshy pads of his fingers, dripping down his wrist.

“Eugh,” he says. “Fine. We’ll walk, then. And freeze. One of these days you’ll get so manic you’ll off yourself.”

Marlene pulls her knife from his hand sideways to dig the cuts deeper and wider. “And you’ll rejoice.”

A shrug. “I’m always looking for things to celebrate.” He wipes his bloody hand on his trousers, folds of split-open

skin parting against the fabric. It must hurt desperately. He doesn't complain.

Marlene leans back in her seat. "I'm just covering our trail," she sighs.

Regulus sighs too. "No trail more invisible than a road of burning houses," he says. Then, "I'm going to find a handful of snow for my hand. I'll get you back for that."

"I'm sure you will," Marlene replies, and spins her blade between her fingers.

He peels himself from his seat and out into the night. She closes the door behind him and locks him out for ten minutes, until he's pounding his fists against the window, pale and blue-tinted as a ghost, eyes wide with madness.

"I knew you would do that," Regulus snaps when Marlene finally opens the door for him. He piles inside, a fistful of white snow pressed to his hand, lips so cracked they've started to bleed. "I knew it."

"Then why did you go?" Marlene replies blithely.

Another shrug. "Don't know," Regulus admits. He peers through the windscreen again, as if searching for something out there. Ghosts or death eaters. "Guess I figured you'd let me back in eventually."

Marlene considered for a few minutes keeping him locked out for good. Her faith in him is entirely misguided. But he probably already knows that.

"Sure," she says simply. "I've got another roll of bandages in my pack, by the way."

Regulus grimaces. "Can you help me put them on?"

"Excuse me? I didn't say you could use them."

He hits her. "Grab them," he says simply. "I don't want this to get infected. You don't clean that knife."

They sleep in the car. The following morning, the doors have frozen themselves shut and Marlene spends half an hour chipping her way free from the iced-in chaff of the car with her knife and her fingernails. She climbs up to press her back to the ceiling of the car and holds her thigh against the window until the rime has melted away enough that she can see the world outside. Pure white; frigid, empty.

"Fuck," she says. "Alright. As many clothes as we can get on, then."

"We're seriously leaving the car," Regulus says through chattering teeth. "Merlin, I should kill you."

"You can try," Marlene says. She reaches into the backseat, still standing with one foot on the wheel, and grabs at their clothes, piled in the footrest behind Regulus. She tosses a shirt at him. "Layers. Let's go."

"I'm taking the gloves," he grumbles, stripping his still-damp sweatshirt off. "We're leaving the boots with the holes in them."

"Kay," Marlene agrees amicably. "Turn away. My modesty."

Regulus rolls his eyes.

They get changed in relative silence. There's the occasional low thundercrack sound of ice thawing around them, as if the pressure of it will crack the whole steel frame wide open. The wind is fierce, rocking the car subtly every few seconds. Fletcher probably died sometime yesterday. Good; he was lucky not to survive long enough to feel this cold.

By the time they're done, Marlene and Regulus have both got at least half a dozen layers on. Multiple shirts and jumpers and then, on top of those, their heavy black coats. They must look quite the pair. Bulky twin executioners.

Marlene layers four pairs of socks inside her boots and tugs them on with effort. "I'm taking the muffler," she tells Regulus. "If not, my face will start to hurt and I'll get bitey."

"You're always bitey," Regulus snaps. At least they've got two hats; that's one thing they won't have to tear between them like hungry wolves.

"Alright," Marlene says, once she's as wrapped-up as she's going to get. She swigs the last of her water down and chucks Regulus the empty canteen. "Here's to keeping our fingers and toes."

Regulus takes a swig from the container and scowls when he realises it yields no water. "I hate you," he mutters.

Marlene plants a foot against the panel along the side of the door. She rears her knee back and kicks it three times in quick succession; she jars her ankle on the second, the pain of it is fantastic.

On the fourth kick, the door cracks and clefts and comes open, swinging jerkily back a few inches on its hinge. Marlene kicks it again and a wave of cold air hits her. She

pulls the muffler over her face and plants a foot out into the snow.

It's deep, at least a foot or a foot and a half. She clambers from the car into the bright white underworld, the clouds so low they seem to form a sort of ceiling, pressing down against them. She stares around, taking in the frost-peaked trees and the gently falling snow. It's almost beautiful, like something from a charity Christmas card.

"Shit," she mutters. She hikes her bag up on her back. "Regulus, come on."

Regulus clambers out after her. He's already shivering; he's cold all the time anyway, this shit must be staggering. He steps into the snow beside her and blinks at Marlene, eyelids blueish and blackened.

"F-Fuck," he says. "Fuck."

"Buck up," Marlene replies. She slams the door closed and shoves him over.

Regulus barely manages to catch himself with the sideview mirror. He kicks her, trying to sweep her legs out from under her, and Marlene laughs, barely staggering.

"Just testing your reflexes," she snorts.

"Fuck you," Regulus gasps. He's shorter than her, with shorter legs too, and he's knee-deep in snow. He shakes his head like a dog, trying to get the snow out of his hair.

"Come on. If we stick to the road—"

He turns to look east, towards the road they've stopped beside. It's entirely obscured by snow; it might as well not be there, its concrete plot buried.

"Shit," Regulus says. He wraps his arms around himself and shudders.

"C'mon," Marlene tells him. "The longer we stand here the quicker we freeze."

They trudge to where they think the road must be, the shape of it winding through the whitened trees. The wind of the storm has calmed through the night but it'll get worse through the day; Marlene can taste the tension of it, rushing up from the south. They won't have good visibility for long.

"This way, then," she says cheerfully, and starts off through the snow, picking her feet up as she goes so as to keep the snow from sinking into her socks. It doesn't help much.

Regulus hurries after her, head ducked into his hood. He zips up his coat until the collar comes up over his red nose and blue mouth. He looks liked a fucked up impressionist art piece, something someone rejected from an artshow.

"Cold," he mutters. "God, fucking. Cold."

"Yeah," Marlene reassures. "I'd noticed."

They walk for hours, not stopping to rest. Rest means sitting and sitting means their blood pressures will plummet, which will make them both colder. Marlene keeps up a good pace. Regulus has to jog every few minutes to catch up because he keeps falling behind. He complains about it regularly. She ignores him.

It's perfectly still and silent out here. No hum of cars on the road or the rumble of distant industry, ever-present as it

was further west. Marlene has never sought peace — she isn't Mary, she will never be Mary, she is at her fundamentals as far from a peacekeeper as she thinks it is possible to be. But there's a sort of deathly peace to it. A funeral, the whole strip of mountains a great coffin, the rocky nails of it dark grey and craggy below the horizon, above which brightness is falling so heavily through the stormclouds that it casts huge godly sheets of light down over the snowcaps, illuminating them in a clear line of white fire.

Marlene is not a persistent person. She spends more time abandoning things than doing much of anything else. But she thinks she could, in good conscience, walk through this forest for days without stopping. The cold feels like it's shot her up and she's running on a painful tenterhooks high, on the edge of a knife.

Regulus doesn't speak at all. He gets so far behind sometimes that over the sound of snow falling and the birds in the trees, hiding beneath thick evergreen overhangs to avoid the cold, Marlene cannot hear him anymore. She thinks sometimes that he's collapsed. But he always runs back to her, skidding to a stop at her side, panting. Sometimes he takes her arm in his hand and tries to hold her back, to tell her to slow down without saying it. Marlene completely ignores him. She doesn't speak either. It's as though the cold has frozen her tongue to the roof of her mouth.

A flock of late migrating birds swoops low overhead as noon arrives, sunlight breaching the clouds. Heading south, probably too far into winter to make it in time before they freeze. Such is nature. Marlene feels a little ominous at that.

“Fletcher,” is the first thing Regulus says. They must have been walking for five or six hours.

Marlene looks over her shoulder at him. He’s five or ten feet behind her, slogging tired feet through the mire.

“Yes?” she says.

“Fletcher,” Regulus repeats. He jogs a few heavy, tired paces to her. “The snow will have buried him. It’ll be ages ‘til he’s found.”

“Good. He’ll decompose.”

“Bodies don’t work like that,” he replies promptly. “It’s subzero. The cold will preserve him, he won’t even get maggots, probably. Fresh as new.”

“Huh,” Marlene says. “Cool.”

Regulus takes her arm again. He squeezes it, hand at her wrist, digging his thumb into the pulse point.

“He’s dead,” he says, haunted. “Dead.”

Marlene slows to a stop for the first time. She feels all the blood in her body fizz and pop like soda or cocaine or small fireworks. Her pulse is all out of whack and she can’t feel her feet or legs or hands or face or throat. She can’t feel anything.

“We’ve killed people before,” she says. “What’s the difference now?”

“Dunno,” Regulus mumbles. “It’s just freaking me out more.”

"Fuck off," Marlene says. "I'm not going to give you the muffler. I don't feel sorry for you."

He looks up at her under his frozen black eyebrows. "It was worth a try," he says. He shudders visibly. "He's dead."

"Fucking stop it."

"No, I mean it, it's not a joke."

"Yeah he's dead," Marlene says. "So what? Thief, nobody. Willing death eater. You know the fucking stir the Gryffindors caused when your brother went missing? Trying to figure out if it was willful or not. And when they figured out that it wasn't, that's when they made him a martyr. I had to put up with their sentimental bullshit for months, Lily Evans stole my fucking magazines and didn't give them back, I'm still sort of annoyed about that—"

"I don't care," Regulus snaps, "about my brother."

"That makes two of us. I just didn't think you'd care about the actual death eater either," Marlene taunts.

"Those aren't comparable."

"We're gonna freeze," she says. "Unless you leave your philosophising at the door. Are you coming or not?"

Regulus blinks at her. He scowls deeply. "Fine," he snaps. "Lead the way."

Marlene starts off through the snow again. She looks up towards the mountains and their fierce bright peaks have dulled a bit. Less fire and more smouldering. The clouds press lower, colourless and fluffy. Almost close enough to touch, to tear and chew.

They walk for three or four more minutes in quiet. Wind whistles through their clothes. Marlene tears open the middle of her zip and tucks her hands into her coat, pressing their cold joints to her ribs.

“I think I’ve figured it out,” Regulus says. “The basilisk fangs. The fiendfyre. It all makes sense. I’ve got it.”

“Oh, shut up!” Marlene shouts at him. She wheels around and screams in his face, “Keep fucking walking and tell me about it later!”

Regulus scowls at her. “It’s important!”

“If we don’t speed up we’ll die!”

“Whose fault will that be?! You said it would be normal—”

“Get fucked,” Marlene taunts. “You believed me.”

“I figured it out,” Regulus says again, more urgently. “This is important. It’s big—”

Marlene draws her hands from her coat to shove them over her ears. “Can’t hear you!”

Regulus kicks her hard in the back of the legs and then pummels his fists into her back over and over, bam-bam-bam-bam like a boxer. Marlene tumbles into the ice and drags him by his scarf down with her. He digs his knee into her stomach, drowning in a foot of heavy snowdrift, sinking away from her where the side of the road dips down a slope. Marlene kicks him in the teeth. He spits one out and it lands in a little red bloody pit beside him.

“Pull me out,” he gasps. “My foot’s stuck— I’m stuck—”

“Ha,” Marlene says. “Ha, hahaha, ha.”

Regulus hauls himself out on his own. With wide unhinged eyes, he pushes himself to his feet and grapples his hands around her throat.

“I’m so fucking sick of you—” he starts.

Nearby, there is a sharp, loud sound. Regulus drops her. There isn’t a moment of hesitation. They both throw themselves into the snowbank for cover.

Because that was the sound of apparition.

“Get down!” Marlene hisses. She tugs at Regulus and they shuffle lower down the slope, out of sight of the road. He starts digging himself into the snow and she follows, trying to burrow inside of its cold white mass.

“Bumpy landing,” someone says, barely thirty feet away. Further down the road.

“Apologies.” A French accent, low, rumbling. “I am... unpracticed. At sidealong, that is.”

“It’s fine.” A pause. “God, it’s freezing.”

“Not the coldest place we’ll go,” the French one replies. “Come. They can’t be far from here. Last I checked, they were pushing north-east.”

Marlene and Regulus both freeze. They stare at each other.

“I still don’t really know what to do with this,” the higher voice replies. British. Midlands sort of accent.

“You’ll learn,” the French one replies. “Come. We’ll search for their tracks.”

There are footsteps, approaching. Marlene digs herself deeper into the snow and prays not to be seen.

“It’s not something you just pick up, though,” English says. “You have to be trained. This is new to me, I’ve never—well. I used a knife earlier this year. On a train with my friends. Long story.”

“We’ve got time for it, I’m sure. It’ll be a long hunt. They’re reclusive.”

English hesitates. “Fighting without a wand still feels wrong,” she says. “I spent a year training to fight a war with magic, I told you about that. Training to do this with—with riddikulus and stuff. I feel weaponless.”

There’s a pause. The footsteps stop. Marlene stiffens, sure they’ve been spotted.

“Listen,” the French one says. “I understand. But wands—they are not your only weapon. This knife—” A pause, as if for emphasis. “It owes you allegiance as much as any wand would. Use it as part of yourself. And you will be fine.”

“That’s so bloody vague,” English sighs. Marlene realises with a thrill that she recognises that voice. “There’s a disturbance in the snow, look, there.”

A pause. “Those aren’t the type of tracks we’re looking for,” French laughs. “Come.”

Their footsteps start up again, trekking out into the wastes. When the pair begin to talk again, they’re almost too far away to hear.

“So I hold it this way?” English is asking.

French laughs. “Just right. You are a natural, Evans.”

Evans.

“Oh shit,” Marlene breathes.

She and Regulus wait in the snowbank for what feels like hours for the voices to fade completely. When Marlene can gather the courage, she raises her head and peers down the road. There, sure enough, in the far distance among the falling snow is Evans’ bright red hair, shorn very short, above the collar of a heavy snow coat. She’s walking alongside an extraordinarily tall figure with a curly mass of dark hair.

Before Marlene’s eyes, the two of them duck into the forest and out of sight.

“Was that who I think it was?” Regulus murmurs.

“Lily fucking Evans,” Marlene hisses. “That certifies it. They’re looking for me. They’re fucking hunting me.”

“No,” Regulus says. He sits up and makes a grab for her, missing. His hand sinks into the snow between them. “They saw our footsteps. They’re not looking for people, not humans— they must be hunting some, some— some animal or something—”

“Are you fucked in the head?!” Marlene demands. “Why would she be out here of all places to hunt, what, an endangered snow leopard? A rare type of fucking bowtruckle? It’s a war, use your brain, Black — they must’ve seen some other track, like an animal’s, and missed ours— of course they’re looking for us. They must be out here for the Order. They even said— they said, north-east.

They know we're heading for Poland. We need to change course."

"How," Regulus grits out. "How would they know we're going that way? Are they mind-readers, Marlene? Mind-readers?!"

"I don't know!" Marlene shouts, hearing her voice echo against the trees. "I don't know, but there's no other reasonable explanation—"

"They're probably tracking down magical beasts," Regulus says. "Or, fucking— centaurs, maybe! Vampires, or werewolves! Some sort of pack thing, I don't know. Some humanitarian bullshit for the Order. It's got nothing to do with us. You're just an idiot, you're just so up in your own head about this stuff that you've convinced yourself that you're this great villain with hundreds of enemies—"

"Shut up!"

"—When you're really just a kid," Regulus says viciously, "with a fucking timer on your shoulder ticking down to the day you die out here, you're not fucking special, neither am I — you talk a game about Sirius not being the chosen one, well neither are you! There isn't one!"

The aftermath of his outburst leaves an ugly, hanging silence. Marlene stares at him, sitting in the snow, hands underneath her. She wants to muster the energy to attack him. Hurt him. She wants to tear the skin from his face with her teeth.

But she can't do any of that. She can barely blink. She feels rooted in place.

"I," she manages eventually. "Am trying to stay alive. Which is more than can be said for you."

Regulus watches her with large, grey eyes. He looks so much like his brother.

Marlene feels like she can move her body again. She draws herself up tall, looking down at him in the snowdrift. He stares up at her and seems to accept that he might truly be about to die this time. His eyes flutter closed.

"Come on," Marlene tells him simply. "I'm letting you get away with that one. Payback for your hand."

He looks up at her. "Really?" he asks, and he looks for the first time like the boy she met outside the burning manor in France again.

"No," Marlene replies. She curls a hand into his hair and brings her knee down against his shoulder and presses him into the earth until she feels it wrench the wrong way out of place.

Regulus doesn't even scream. Just asks her to put it back in once she's done.

Dorcas,

We're changing course. Gunning for Slovakia now, since the Order's on our ass (Lily Fucking Evans, of all fucking people). There have been whispers... Regulus thinks Slovakia's a bad idea, but he's rarely right about anything, so I don't particularly trust his judgement. Apparently there's been some conflict out there. But we'll be fine. How bad can it be?

We should hit it mid-December, at this rate. There's a town not far off that we can see from this point in the road. Three miles or so. We want to reach it before nightfall; that's why this one is so short.

Not gonna send it anyway. I think you wouldn't appreciate it. Plus, it's all soggy.

- Marlene.

They manage to scrape together the change for a hotel room. After fourteen hours of trekking through the snow, they're both so cold and tired that they collapse the moment they're inside the door in a pathetic heap.

"This is the worst thing I've ever had to do," Regulus says from underneath her. He rubs at his face. "Your eyelid is bleeding again."

Marlene watches the ceiling spin above her, finding it mildly entertaining. "A warm bed," she says. "Come on. We should... get up. Get changed. Warm shower."

"Warm shower when we're this cold will hurt us," Regulus says. "It's... you're not meant to. Meant to use lukewarm water. Neutral. Or it'll send you into shock." His teeth clack together around each word.

"Fuck off," Marlene tells him. "Stop ruining all my fun." She pulls herself up until she's half-standing, leaning heavily against a dresser. She limps to the bathroom.

Regulus was right about the heat; the pain and rush of it almost make her black out when she steps beneath the hot spray. Marlene falls against the tiled wall and leans there for what might be hours, breathing in the steam, feeling the

burn scorch across her skin and bring her out in patchy red blotches, almost purple. She's one big bruise when she catches herself in the mirror, patchy pale brown and deep purple and angry red. Her face has pale blotches across it, up her nose and across her cheeks. When she touches them, they feel frozen solid to the touch.

"Shit," Marlene breathes to herself. She would never say it to Regulus, but she doesn't know that she can put up with another day of this. She doesn't know that she could walk more than ten more steps.

Night swells against the frosted window set into the top of the wall. Marlene ascertains that she's not frostbitten, but probably wasn't far off it. She turns the water off only when it's gone cold, stepping out of the shower and piling herself into every towel she can get her hands on. She sits on the toilet seat and stares herself down in the mirror, watching herself melt. God, being frozen almost solid makes her look fucking white, which is surprisingly only the second most unfortunate thing to have happened to her today.

But she's still alive.

When she's finally got the strength, Marlene reaches for her bag and feels around inside. She pulls out the only dry clothes she's got. A spare bra and a knitted sweatshirt and black knee-length shorts. She pulls them on and pads, barefoot and bleeding from unhealed blisters, out into the hotel room.

The scene she finds inside isn't quite what she's expecting.

Regulus is pressed right up into the far corner, furthest from the window. He's got the first truly fearful look on his face she's ever seen there: if Marlene thought she knew what he looked like afraid, evidently she's never seen him

like this, arms around his knees, staring at the window like death itself has its hand to the glass.

If Marlene was more present of mind, she would probably react quicker. Instead, she blinks from Regulus to the dark window and back, rubbing her face.

“What?” she asks.

Regulus flinches hard as if he didn’t see her enter. He has lied to her before, lied about more than even he is probably aware of, but this seems startlingly human.

He raises a shaking hand, pointing silently to the window. He doesn’t speak. Marlene squints towards the blackness. She takes a tentative step forwards.

Something swings out from the black night, fast and large. It smacks against the glass, lunging into the light. And it swoops back out of view. And then once again. And then again.

It’s an owl. An owl trying to get in.

“Oh, fuck,” Marlene murmurs.

“It’s,” Regulus stutters. “That’s my mother’s owl. It’s hers.”

She looks over her shoulder at him. Regulus hasn’t pulled off his dark coat. It sits around him like a curse; he looks small in it. He stares up at her as if he wants her to make the thing scaring him go away. Marlene isn’t sure why. If she has ever brought him anything, it isn’t ease.

“The spell,” he chokes out. “If I touch the it, she’ll know it’s me. The letter.”

“How the fuck did she find us?” Marlene demands.

Regulus’ brow furrows. “It’s a hunting owl,” he murmurs. “It’s probably been looking for months.”

Marlene sets her jaw. “If *I* touch the letter?”

“It might not register.”

“Since I’m not a pureblood?”

A short nod. Regulus tucks his arms tighter around himself. He opens his mouth and then closes it. Then, he says, no trace of mockery or deceit in it, “If I go back to Durmstrang, they’ll kill me. If I go back to my mother, she’ll kill me faster.”

“You mean that?” Marlene asks, just to be sure.

Regulus nods. His eyes burn holes in the floor. “Yes,” he whispers. “I’m sure.”

“Alright then,” she says simply. And with a small pain in the top of her chest that feels like heart failure or something, Marlene walks to the window and opens it.

The owl flutters in. It perches on the pane and blinks up at her once.

“Thank you,” Marlene says curtly. She takes the letter from it and tears it in half. There is no hot sharp magic-feel against her palms. Just paper.

Then, she grabs the eagle owl by the throat and hefts it into the air and swings and pounds it into the fucking radiator. Over and over. It squawks and keens and punctures its hooked beak into the meat of her hand into it draws blood.

Marlene doesn't stop until it's limp in her grip, bloody, its wing twisted out of place.

"Christ," she says. "Do you want me to chuck her out of the window?"

She turns back to Regulus. He's staring at her, startled.

"I like that owl," he murmurs. "She's just a..." He trails off.

Marlene sighs. "I can put her in the hallway. Let the muggles call the Czech RSPCA. Or whatever."

Regulus nods shakily. He stands up and pads across the room. He takes the bird from Marlene's hands and cradles it in his arms, looking down at it, sort of devastated.

Hesitating, Marlene raises an eyebrow at him. "Missing home?" she asks.

He looks up at her. His eyes are a bit wet.

"No," he says eventually. The owl in his arms caws weakly and he clutches it tighter, a hand running through the downy feathers. "No. I miss my old house elf. I set him free. He..."

Regulus seems to stop himself. He holds the owl and stares from Marlene to the window and looks nothing like the boy Marlene knows, who she stays awake each night listening to, wondering. Anticipating attack, a knife in the neck by darkness. He looks like an entirely different species.

"I'll put the owl out," he finishes lamely, voice cracking.

Marlene catches him by the shoulder. It takes some effort but she forces herself not to squeeze too hard.

“You won’t go home?” she asks. She isn’t sure why. She isn’t lonely — that’s certainly not it. But she can’t let him go. She’d sooner kill him than let him go.

Regulus stares up at her. He narrows his eyes and shakes his head. “No,” he says simply. “No, I won’t.”

Marlene drops him. He pads to the door and out into the hallway to find some conspicuous place to leave the thing. He’s too soft; he tries to hide it, but it snuck through and Marlene can smell it on him as well as she can smell bad magic on bad men. And now it is bare between them like an unstitched wound.

By the time Regulus has returned, Marlene has tucked herself into one of the twin beds, beneath mercifully warm, heavy covers. She has begun the lengthy process of feeling human again.

“Keep the light off,” she tells him.

Regulus makes a noise of assent. “I’m going to shower.”

“Okay,” Marlene agrees. She rolls her head over on the pillow to look at him. He looks back at her, front all bloodied. She thinks for a moment that he’s going to attack her. But Regulus doesn’t. He just pads to the bathroom and closes the door, letting the room go dark.

Hours later, she wakes from a strange dream again. Fire licking across dark green waves. Something glowing in the depths beneath them. The fierce heat of smoke against her face. She is a rising flame. She isn’t really here. And she can feel in the darkness a hanging tension. It’s still nighttime. She’s surprised to find she still has an unhalved throat.

Sound. Regulus speaks into the blackness from the other bed. He seems to know instinctively that she isn't asleep anymore.

"Horcruxes," he whispers. "That's why there's fiendfyre. The fangs, too. He made horcruxes. And someone's trying to destroy them. It all makes sense now. He was trying to get them out of the country so nobody could—"

Marlene rolls over. "What are you talking about?"

Regulus looks at her. "Voldemort," he says, voice shaking. His heart sits between them as hollow and fragile as bird bones. "Is a fucking lunatic."

Chapter End Notes

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GOD ON HIGH

Chapter Notes

uploading this latee...sleepeeey..

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Mary isn't the type to hyperbolise, but she has potentially the worst December any human being has ever experienced. It goes like this: Remus Lupin comes home with them, he and Sirius immediately stop talking to each other, and she loses her ability to taste and smell on the first day of winter. And that's only the beginning.

"I'm sure it'll come back on its own," Sirius tells her gently, slathering even more blackberry jam onto a hunk of bread and handing it to her. "Try it now."

"That's more jam than bread," Mary tells him. She tries to wrap trembling fingers around it and drops it onto the floor. "Fuck."

Awkwardly, Sirius picks the piece of bread back up. "We're getting there," he assures her. Then, "How long has he been gone? I should go out and look for him. Maybe he got lost. Fuck."

Remus went out for a walk ten minutes ago. He's perfectly fine. But Mary knows there's no use saying that.

"Maybe," she concedes dully. "Yeah."

"Maybe he got hit by a car."

"Or a tram."

“Or fell in the ocean,” he agrees, looking devastated.

Mary flexes her jaw again. “Bread?” she prompts.

“Oh, shit, yeah.” Sirius feeds her a mouthful. “Still nothing?”

Mary chews. She feels her back teeth go sticky with jam, feels the coarse dry flesh of it against her tongue. But she can’t taste it.

She shakes her head and swallows. “Nothing. I can’t...” And she trails off.

Sirius curses under his breath. “We’ll try again,” he promises. “Maybe you’ve just got a cold or something.”

Sirius, I’m dying. Sirius. But there’s no point in saying what they both already know; it’ll only make it worse.

Remus came back to Reykjavik with them two weeks ago now. For the first two days, he and Sirius were linked at the hip, finishing each other’s sentences, all over each other. Now Remus is off on his own all the time again. Sirius looks perpetually mournful of it. Of whatever between he and Remus has been lost. Whether permanently or temporarily, something has broken.

Mary would feel sorry for him. But she’s got slightly bigger problems to deal with right now.

“When he comes back,” she says, voice cracking. “When he comes back, we have to... he has to...”

Sirius makes a pained sound. “I know,” he says miserably. “I’ll tell him.”

“He still hasn’t heard back from her?”

“Not yet.”

Mary groans faintly. She tries to raise her hand and can’t get it half a foot into the air. Sirius takes it and holds it. They sit there together in communal mourning, neither sure what to say.

“I don’t have long left,” she starts.

“Don’t say it,” Sirius interrupts. “Just... just don’t. Please.”

Mary croaks, “But it’s true.”

His grip on her hand gets tighter; she can’t really feel it. “Yeah. Yí’ān’ll be home soon. He’ll figure something out. New painkillers, maybe—”

She almost wants to laugh. She does laugh. “Ha. Hahaha.” And it hurts like something has split her ribs apart.

“I mean it.”

“It won’t help.”

“Stop it,” Sirius tells her. With a new strength, he stands up, chewing down the rest of the bread until it’s stained his blue lips dark. “We’re fixing you. Like Remus said. He wouldn’t go back on that. I’m gonna go find him.”

“Wait,” Mary starts.

But he’s already turned around and slipped out of the door, leaving her lying there, immobile and alone.

A lump of panic rises in Mary’s throat; she hears him pull on his boots. “Sirius?” she calls, a bit choked up. “Sirius, come

back, please.”

He doesn't listen. She hears him fumble with his keys.

Mary's almost crying now. “Sirius!” she shouts. “Sirius, don't— I can't be on my—”

But the door opens and he slams it behind him, leaving a thin, rattling silence in his wake. Mary's sobbing then, crying harder than she has since this started, and she can't raise her hands to wipe her face, can't raise them even high enough to rest against her lurching chest and hold it together. The helplessness of it, that's the killer. That's what'll bury her. One more day of this and she thinks she'll do it herself and get it over with.

In her ribs, in her gut, the wound seems to cackle, gurgling. It's winning. Day by day, it's winning.

That's how Yí'ān finds her half an hour later.

“Oh, no,” she hears him murmur from the doorway. “Mary, love. Kid.” He comes to his knees beside the sofa. “Don't cry.”

Mary sniffs, trying to blink the tears out of her eyes. “Sirius left,” she chokes out. “He's gone.”

Yí'ān wipes her face with his sleeve. Gently, he sits her up. “Calm down. Can you calm down for me? Please don't cry —”

“I'm not crying,” Mary defends. She sniffs hard and sets her jaw. “I'm done. I'm fine. He's just... just... he went to find Remus. And I can't... I can't move.”

“I told him not to leave you—”

“He didn’t listen.”

Yí’ān shakes his head, looking like he feels very helpless.

“I’m sorry,” he murmurs. “I’ll talk to him.”

“No point,” Mary sniffs. “I can’t taste anymore. It’s gone.”

“Fuck.”

“And Lily still hasn’t replied to Remus.”

Yí’ān rubs at his face. He sits down against the side of the sofa, dark hair unkempt. It needs a wash. He needs a wash, actually; a long shower. He looks unwell.

“I’ll talk to him,” he murmurs. “When he gets back. Properly talk to him.”

“You’ve been saying that for—”

Yí’ān shakes his head. “I know, kid, I know.”

Mary goes quiet. She closes her eyes; she’s tired of this room, the ceiling, the walls. She’s tired of this body. She would like to drown.

“Toast?” Yí’ān offers.

She laughs again, laughs until it hurts. “You know it doesn’t fix anything.”

“Yeah. Still.” He stands up, frowning. “It’ll eat up the time until they get back. And they’re both getting a talking to.”

That sounds interesting to watch, at least. Yí’ān has very obviously not known what to make of Remus since he came home with them. Whether to play protective dad or supportive friend. He’s sort of settled in the middle; he

rarely says a word to Remus, just nods to him and offers niceties. Nobody seems to know what to say to each other, least of all Remus himself, who hovers like a misplaced ghost in the doorways of most rooms and especially around Sirius.

"A talking to," Mary repeats. "Yeah."

By the time Sirius and Remus make it back, it's dark. They stumble in and stand in the hallway together, not touching, hardly looking at each other. They linger there for a while.

Yí'ān coughs from the kitchen. "Boys?"

They both startle. From through the living room door, which has been left ajar, Mary sees Sirius cast Remus a very panicked glance.

Remus speaks up. "Yeah?"

Yí'ān emerges into the entryway. "Come on," he says simply. "Living room. Family meeting."

Seeming to know they can't get out of this one, they troop in. Sirius casts Mary a very guilty look and shoves his way onto the sofa beside her, trying and failing to be gentle. She burrows the arm which is still cooperating with her into his ribs and hopes that it hurts and hopes that it doesn't.

"Sorry," he mumbles into her ear. "About leaving."

"You should be," Mary replies. And, "Is he okay?"

Sirius glances at Remus, taking a seat on the coffee table with his legs crossed. "Uh," he says. "Sorta. We're working

on it.”

“Still hates you.”

“A bit. What else is new?”

Mary inhales through her nose. She can’t smell him, though her brain is still present enough that she can imagine the scent. Magic and the ocean. And, more recently, Remus.

Yí’ān sits down on the other sofa. He presses his hands against his face and heaves in a long, tired breath. None of them speak.

“Alright,” he says after a moment. “Galina’s still kicking.”

It’s the last thing Mary expected him to say. “Oh,” she says.

“They think she’s got a few weeks left, at least,” Yí’ān continues, looking very tired. “She’s made it longer than anybody expected she would. So that’s something. I just got back from Hungary.”

Sirius shuffles around in his seat a bit, looking uncomfortable. “I was going to go see her today,” he starts.

Yí’ān raises a hand. “When I got back,” he says, “Mary was on her own. Sirius.”

“Remus left,” Sirius says immediately. “I had to go find him.”

“I went for a walk!” Remus defends. “Am I not allowed—”

“I didn’t know where you were!”

“I told Mary!”

“Mary didn’t tell me!”

“Oi!” Yí’ān shouts. “Shut it!”

Mary’s never heard him shout at Sirius before. She, Sirius and Remus all flinch.

“Oh, don’t do that,” Yí’ān groans. “I didn’t mean it. Just... just listen to me. We’re figuring this out. What I’m saying is Galina’s... she’s got a while longer. So for now, we need to focus on Mary. If she’s the only one we’re able to save, that is.”

Mary coughs, as if to emphasise his point.

Tentatively, Sirius puts an arm around her. “I really am sorry for leaving,” he says.

“You still haven’t heard from your friend, then?” Yí’ān asks Remus, looking very awkward.

Remus shakes his head. He wrings his hands in his lap. “Nothing,” he says. “It’s been two weeks. I’m scared she’s...” He trails off. “I think we should go anyway. To the Sanctuary, I mean.”

“I’ve been thinking the same thing,” nods Yí’ān. “I say we leave as soon as we can. Mary can’t even taste anymore.”

“Well, if you wanted my input,” grumbles Mary, “we should’ve done this weeks ago. But since nobody’s listening to me on this. And I can’t move.”

Sirius squeezes her a bit; she barely feels it. “Sorry,” he says again. And, louder, “I think we should go. But what if they don’t let us in?”

“It’s better than staying here, isn’t it?” Mary asks. She shudders. “I’d rather try not to die than let it happen.”

“And I want to make sure Lily’s alright,” Remus adds.

“Friends with Lily Evans,” Sirius mutters. “I missed so much. And you’re sure James isn’t dating her?”

Remus flushes bright red. He coughs into his elbow. “Uh,” he says. “No. No, I don’t think so.”

Looking a bit flustered too, Sirius nods. “Yeah,” he mutters. “Right.”

Yíān clears his throat. “We should pack up, then,” he says. “Get out there before midnight, I think. I shouldn’t get any more distress calls tonight, it’s been quieter this week, I can get back here by dawn—”

“What?!” Sirius demands. “You can’t leave us there!”

Yíān blinks at him. “Why not?”

Shrivelling a bit, Sirius shrugs. He retracts his working arm from around Mary and wraps it around his stomach instead. “Just stay for a bit,” he mutters. “Please?”

“...We’ll see what it’s like when we get there,” compromises Yíān. “Come on. We should get ready to go.”

Still sitting on the coffee table, Remus glances around. Then, he speaks up. “Don’t you think it might be dangerous? Bringing Sirius, I mean. Since he’s wanted—there might be people there with... with bad intentions.” He shrugs.

Sirius goes very still. "Maybe," he echoes. One of the knives tattooed across his clavicle flexes.

They then seem to remember they're supposed to be being angry at each other. They turn away from one another, both frowning.

Yí'ān rolls his eyes. "If you don't feel safe to go," he starts.

"No," Sirius says quickly. "I." He hesitates. "I've got to be brave. Right? That's what she said. And it's still true." He steels himself. "I've got to be brave."

For the first time, Yí'ān smiles faintly. Proudly. "That's the spirit," he says gently. "You two, grab your stuff. Mary, we can dress your wound again before you go."

Sirius clambers off Mary. He and Remus make for the door, determinedly not looking at each other.

"And can you stop arguing?!" Mary calls after them. They both ignore her.

They apparate to Butzow and take the train by night into Rostock, in case of wards and traps. Their strange cohort gets some odd looks as they haul Mary aboard, dragging her limp legs up the steps into the carriage, but nobody stops them; worse things happen out here. Yí'ān deposits her in a seat and mutters something about keeping guard at the window, stalking off, clearly far too awkward for this.

Mary, locked up tight with pain, settles her head back against the seat and closes her eyes. When she opens them again, Sirius and Remus have settled into the seats opposite. Sirius is staring at his hands, pensive, the black

veins and pulsing lights of the magical one seeming to transfix him. Remus is looking out of the window. Neither speaks.

The night flashes by outside. Mary tries to tilt her neck to look at it and doesn't quite manage it. She almost asks Sirius to turn it for her but before she can, he closes his eyes, resting his head against the back of his chair. His hand falls limp in his lap.

"Fuck," Remus murmurs. He looks askance at Mary. "You okay? Don't answer that. That was stupid. Sorry."

Mary imagines that she's shaken her head. "Wasn't planning on it."

Remus has his backpack in his lap. It's still full of chains and letters. He wraps his arms around it tightly, hugging it to his chest. "I'm glad we're doing this."

"Me too."

"And maybe she really did write back. I mean, nobody's letters have been getting anywhere, really."

When Remus first told Mary that Dorcas didn't know she was alive, Mary didn't cry. She didn't feel the capacity to. It was just a sort of full numbness, making her feel bloated and blown-up. She sat in it for days and she's still living inside of it now.

"Yeah," she murmurs. "Yeah. Maybe."

"God," Remus mutters. "I need to talk to James. I need... James," he finishes lamely.

The train jolts. Sirius, dead to the world, slumps to the side. He lands on Remus' shoulder. With unbridled tenderness, Remus situates him more comfortably there. He raises a hand to push the hair out of his hair and it lingers overlong, a stranger in the doorway.

Mary tries to chuckle. It rattles out and doesn't sound much like a laugh at all. "You," she says. "You."

Remus glances up at her. His hand drops. "We've still got lots of stuff to sort out," he says. "About... all of this. Him leaving."

"I need James," Mary replies pointedly.

Remus looks away, uncomfortable now. His hand comes back up and he strokes Sirius' hair again, not seeming like he's able to help it. Sirius opens one eye and looks at Mary, still very much awake. Then he closes it again, not moving, breathing even.

"James needs to be there," he agrees. "But James has... he might as well already be dead. You know how things have been in Britain. So I guess we're stuck like this for now. In this... flux."

"Mmm," Mary says, though she doesn't understand it, not any of it. God knows if Marlene or Dorcas were here she would be kissing them and not stopping. She wouldn't let go for a moment. Maybe that's just because she can feel the end coming. Maybe it's regret. She's not sure.

"You shouldn't worry about us," Remus tells her. "Worry about yourself. We'll all be fine, somehow."

"Mmm," Mary says again. She swallows her pride and a bit of spit and says, "I'm scared nobody's going to remember

me. If I die." *When I die.*

"Mary—"

"Don't say anything," she cuts in. "Won't help."

Looking devastated, Remus nods. "Right," he says. "Sorry."

"It's fine. It's just true." She shrugs. "My parents are halfway across the world by now. Sirius will be dead soon too. All of us might be dead soon." She laughs a bit at the irony of it. "Look at us. Sirius and I half dead already. A werewolf and... Yí'ān."

"Yí'ān," Remus agrees, laughing too. He's got a strange look in his eye. He sobers and then says, "You know, they lied to me."

"Who?"

"The wolves."

"Oh," Mary says. Remus has barely spoken about what brought him to Hungary that day. She didn't think he ever would.

He nods once. "I knew they would," he carries on. "But it still hurts, I think. They... wanted me out of the way. Didn't trust that I was really one of them. And I get why. But for a while I guess I'd felt like I belonged there. I think about it a lot."

"I'm sorry," Mary says lamely. She feels the indignance melt from her every time someone gets like this; she feels twelve again, feeling like her suffering wasn't suffering enough.

Remus shrugs. "I knew it was a hoax," he says. "They send people like me out here all the time. I guess I'd just wanted, a bit, to die for my country. And now I can't. Since even they don't want me there."

Mary wants to hug him. But still, she can't move, she could cry with the frustration of it. All she has are words and she's no good with them; she's tangled in the bare straining dregs of too many languages, she feels trapped in them.

"He wants you here," she murmurs. She nods to Sirius. "I know he does."

Sirius' face twists but he doesn't open his eyes, nor move.

Remus touches his hair again, gentle and reverent. "I'm not sure you're right."

"Then you don't know him well enough."

"I probably don't," he agrees evenly.

"That's not what I meant," Mary says, and then, "nevermind. If you don't want to listen to me, don't."

Remus blinks. "James," he says simply, after a moment. "It's all about James. I think... I think we'll always do this." He laughs and it's a naked sound. "When Sirius wasn't here, it was all about him. And now James isn't here, it's about him."

"Maybe when you're not there, it's all about you," Mary offers.

An ugly sound comes out of Remus, derisive and bitter. "I," he says, stuttering a bit, "I've never not been there."

Mary doesn't know what to say to that. With immense effort, she manages to twist her neck enough to look out of the window. The pain of it brings tears to her eyes and she can barely see it. It takes her a while to blink them away.

"Lily Evans," she says, to avoid talking about love anymore, which is painful enough for both of them, the abandoned and the deserters alike. "She, of all people, not answering your letters. I wouldn't believe it."

"Ha," Remus snorts. "She's not infallible. Maybe you're right, though. I mean, the delivery service would've failed in two days if it wasn't for her."

And then his face changes. It's like a storm has rolled over; he goes very still and then jolts so hard Sirius goes sliding off his shoulder and pretends to come awake, staring around.

"Holy shit," Remus says. "The letters. That's it."

"What?" Mary asks. "What are you talking about?"

"Remus?" Sirius asks groggily. "Moons—"

"The Order hasn't gone down," Remus says. He stands up and, in the empty carriage, begins to pace up and down the aisle. "Oh, I hate him. Oh, fuck, what happened to him? Maybe he's hurt—"

"What?" Sirius asks. He sounds urgent now. He stares from Remus to Mary, eyes wide. "What?"

"James." Remus shakes his head. He looks halfway angry and halfway scared. It makes him appear animal. "I can't believe I didn't realise it before. But it makes sense. The Order's not gone down. It's just the letters. That's the only

thing that's changed. For all we know, everything else is still going smoothly back in London. They're not sending our fucking letters." And he points at Mary. "That's why they don't know you're alive! And Sirius, you— if you've written to them, they wouldn't have gotten it, because whoever's meant to be processing those letters, they haven't been! Oh fuck. It makes so much sense. And everyone thinks they wiped out the Order—"

Mary knows very well that Sirius hasn't been writing. But she's not going to be the one to mention it. She cuts in, "Rostock. We need to tell the people at Rostock, get them to go to London, to see for themselves— we can tell them the Order's address—"

Sirius looks dazed. "Something happened to James?" he asks.

"Maybe," Remus agrees. His eyes go wide again and he smacks a fist into his palm. "His chest. He hurt his chest. What if it's that? What if he's— what if—"

He collapses back into his seat. He and Sirius stare at each other, both devastated. They mirror one another, and all of a sudden Mary can tell it's no longer about the letters.

"Shit," whispers Sirius. "James."

Mary clears her throat. "If that's true," she says. "If it's true, that means they didn't get my recent letters either. She still doesn't know."

"We can get someone to go to London," Remus says immediately. "Someone from Rostock, one of the leaders there. Or maybe Yí'ān."

“Half of it’s on fire. And the whole centre’s overrun with death eaters—”

“We can go ourselves.”

“Not without apparition,” Sirius says. “They might have warded the city, though—” His hands are shaking violently. “And I don’t— I can’t—”

“If I went with you?” Remus asks desperately.

Sirius looks from him to Mary. “We need to keep her alive first,” he says. “We need—”

“He could be dead!”

“I know that! Give me a second. Just give me a minute.”

There’s a faint cough. Yí’ān drops a heavy hand onto Sirius’ shoulder and says, “Rostock first.”

Sirius looks up at him desperately. “James,” he says.

“I know.” Yí’ān shakes his head firmly. “Mary first. We deal with everything else after. Sirius, stop.” He grabs him by the shoulders. “*Breathe.*”

Mary closes her eyes and tries not to listen to Sirius’ raking breaths. She can feel Remus looking at her helplessly. Neither of them knows what to do. The train rattles, a high, cruel noise, and before them, the ocean opens up and Mary can’t see it, can only imagine it in her mind. She wonders if she’ll ever swim again.

When she next looks up, Remus is holding Sirius’ hand. And that’s something, Mary supposes, and continues to rot in her seat.

Rostock is a crushed-together wheal cluster of a town that suffered at the hands of the muggle war, but perhaps not as much as it could've. Most of the buildings are still in one piece and Mary can see, as Sirius and Remus haul her with each of her arms over their shoulders through the streets towards the hills, that life is still thriving here like a gut biome. There are people surviving. They're moving forwards and the tide is still rolling.

The same maybe cannot be said for the Sanctuary. It's out of sight, wherever it is; warded off in the trees miles from the shore, Yí'ān thinks, and Mary's inclined to agree. When she'd been told about a haven on the coast she had imagined a lighthouse looming before dark waters. But this feels more real. More like a hidden military complex. Far more the realm of soldiers than the injured, judging by how many muggle ones linger on the streets among the milling muggle crowd. Injury and sickness must not be uncommon here. Nobody stops Mary, Remus and Sirius, even though she must look more corpse than person, head hanging low, feet turned back against the ground and toes dragging along it.

By the time the four of them reach the back of the town, where it hinges against a steep gravel road into the hills, Mary can't see through the pain. It's heavy, pressing blackness.

"Stop," she gasps. "Stop. Please."

The dark world around her morphs. There are people talking; someone lowers her to the ground, speaking to her gently. She can't make out what they're saying and wants to yell and scream at them to shut up.

“—And we can make it up there in an hour if we pick up our pace,” somebody is saying, when she fuzzes back in. “We just need to speed up or the journey’ll kill her. Don’t look at me like that.”

“She can’t walk on her own. She can barely open her eyes. Look at her.”

“Then what are you suggesting?”

“I don’t know! This was a terrible idea, we should’ve just—”

Mary coughs weakly. “God,” she gasps. She thinks that she can see him. Low over the tops of the trees and looming close to watch.

A hand presses to the side of her face. “Shh,” someone says. “Stay awake for me, okay? Stay awake now.”

“Okay,” Mary whispers. She drags a hand to her stomach and feels the cold of the kettering, the biting pain. It’s won. It was winning and now it’s won.

“We can still go back to Reykjavik,” a voice is pressing. “She can stand one more apparition. We can work out another plan. Find Claude—”

“I’ve written to them every day this week,” the closer voice replies. “They haven’t answered any of them. Shit. Look at her.”

“Well, I don’t see any other option—”

A pause. “I’m carrying her, then.”

“No,” someone says immediately. “If you fold her like that it might reopen the wound—”

"I can handle it," Yí'ān replies sharply. It's his voice. Him. Mary's sure of it. "It's not like you can do it, with that arm. And, erm, Remus, you don't seem— quite in the right... shape... with the, uh, moon."

A hesitation. "I suppose not," Remus opines.

"It'll only be an hour," Yí'ān says.

"You're almost as weak as he is," Sirius protests.

"We don't have another option!"

"There's always another option!"

"What — letting her die?"

"No!" Sirius snaps. "No, of course not. Just... just... I can't think right now, okay, just give me a minute."

Yí'ān cuts in, "I don't need a minute. Sirius, I love you, I do. But I'm not letting anybody else die. Not after Galina. I'm not taking your judgement on this."

A long, ugly silence.

"Fine," Sirius says eventually. "Sorry."

"Fuck. I'm sorry."

"No, I am. Really. I—"

Remus clears his throat. "Urgent situation here," he reminds gently. "Come on."

Someone leans over Mary; warm hands hover over her. "Can you hear me?"

She groans faintly. “Stupid.”

“Ha. She’s still there,” Yí’ān snorts, sounding panicked beneath it. “I’m going to pick you up. Is that okay?”

Mary tries to swallow the pain and pride and everything else. She wants— wants— isn’t sure what she wants. To sink into the earth. Or into Marlene. She wants Marlene. Or her mother; her mother and her hair.

“Yeah,” she whispers. “Go for it.”

Yí’ān slides very gentle arms under her. He hefts her slowly from the ground and it’s still painful, being pressed around her gut, but less than being dragged was. He lets out a short grunt and under her, Mary feels him sway.

“Shit,” Sirius’ voice says.

“I’ve got her,” Yí’ān mutters. “Come on. Let’s walk.”

The stabbing becomes a heartbeat, and the heartbeat becomes a war drum. Mary sings along to it in her head, songs she knew as a kid. Windrush punk and the wartime of her youth. The world fades around her and she doesn’t open her eyes again, scared of what she’ll see. There are quiet voices and soon, silence. Footsteps, only footsteps. The sway of the hands beneath her. The staggering, stilted rhythm.

Mary’s never been afraid of what she doesn’t know or understand; she’s afraid of a lot of things, of death eaters and Dublin and most of the people she’s ever loved dying. But this, the darkness of the inside of her eyelids, the precarity. It doesn’t scare her anymore. She just wants to

sleep and sleep and never know wakefulness. She thinks she says as much, in less words, in less poetics. Someone shushes her and brushes her hair from her eyes. It's finally gotten long enough to sit across her face. The irony isn't lost on her.

By the time she is lowered to the ground, Mary feels a bit more present in herself. She is rested against something hard and cold and gets the impression it's been a long time since they began ascending up the hillside.

Something hits the ground beside her. Slowly, Mary peels her eyes open.

They're sprawled, all of them, like downed bodies. In a field; no, it's a stretch of uncut grass that yields for half a mile ahead of her. There's light to her right, sprayed across the ground, the source out of sight. Mary's resting against what she thinks is a wall, or the ruins of one. The ground has levelled out. The side of the hill stretches down and down to her right. There's a fence nearby, tall and chain-linked.

Yí'ān is on the ground beside her, gasping for breath, arms folded under him. Nearby, Sirius and Remus have sat together in a heap, resting back to back with their heads on each other's shoulders with their cheeks together. Remus is flushed with exertion. Sirius is cradling his limp arm in his lap, pale and panting. Nobody is speaking.

"We made it then?" Mary croaks.

"Most of the way." Sirius reaches out, leaning forwards towards her. Remus falls against his back and they both end up on the ground. He twists her head gently to the left.

"Look."

Mary stares. Out ahead, in the distance — another half mile away, probably — lies a huge old building. Muggle-made and countless windows wide. Floors up. A stately old noble home or something. It's aglow with light from the inside. The Sanctuary. Against the dark trees clustered around it, its brightness looks as welcoming as its name.

And before it, stretching down the remains of a stone wall that runs from the Sanctuary down through the grass and through a gap in a chain link fence, a line. Sitting families, clustered together in small groups. Injured witches and wizards, some kettered, some merely starving. There are dozens of them and the four of them are at the very back of the line.

"Oh," mutters Mary. "They're full."

"Yep," Sirius tells her grimly. "Very full."

Remus pulls him back up. They sit against each other again. He says to Mary, "It only took us an hour and a half to get you up here, so that's something."

Mary tries to dart her eyes in Yí'ān's direction, who she can't see clearly anymore. "Is he okay?"

"As okay as he was going to be," Remus says. "Not the... strongest. Erm. But I guess it would've been better than Sirius or I."

"We're all pitiful," Mary says. She laughs, a choking noise, and then laughs harder. She can hardly believe she's still alive. This feels sort of like a good dream; she's terrified to wake up. "God, look at us."

"We made it!" defends Sirius. He's laughing too. He grabs at Remus' hand and tries to hold it at their sides. Remus

only grudgingly lets him.

On the ground, Yí'ān manages to shuffle into Mary's eyeline. He looks even more like James now that he looks half dead. He, too, seems not to have enough oxygen.

"I'm good," he wheezes. "Are you okay?"

"I think it tore open a bit," Mary rasps. "But how much worse can it get?"

"Someone get her wood to touch," Yí'ān replies. He finds his way over to Sirius and Remus and slumps to the ground against the wall near them, watching the Sanctuary. "Ah, balls. There have been rumours it was full, but I didn't think... shit."

"Not too late to go back to Reykjavik?" Remus asks, a touch dryly.

Sirius tries to sit up a bit. "I should cut the line," he says shakily. "Since Mary's in such bad condition, maybe... maybe..."

"No, look. There's a healer coming this way," Mary interjects. "Look."

At least, she thinks it's a healer. Her vision is still blurry and spotted. But they're in robes, crouching down further up the line to tend to an injured child. Descending down slowly towards them.

"Oh," Sirius says. He slumps back into Remus. "Then we wait."

"And we hope I don't die," Mary agrees.

“You’re back to your usual self,” observes Remus, though he does it with a smile to lessen the bite.

Mary grins back. “I’m alive,” she says with quiet victory. “For a bit longer, at least.”

“And we’re keeping you that way,” promises Yí’ān. “God, my arms. I’ll regret this tomorrow.”

“Provided we sleep tonight,” Sirius interjects.

“That’s not how muscles work, kiddo.”

“Don’t call me kiddo.” He wrinkles his nose.

“You’re kiddo to me until you can drink,” promises Yí’ān.

“I can drink in Britain!”

“Are we in Britain?”

Sirius takes the point. It seems to remind him of something; his face turns cold. “James,” he murmurs.

Mary can’t see well, but she can see clearly enough to watch Remus squeeze his hand. “Don’t think about it.”

“Right.” A pause. “Well, if we’re going to be here a while, I might sleep.”

Remus laughs, seeming to find that very funny. “You,” he says. “You.”

“Me?”

“You.”

Sirius shuffles away from him and the movement offers the distinct visual of two halves separating. He crawls to Mary's side and lies heavily against her shoulder. It hurts and it's probably supposed to, to keep her grounded. To hold her here on earth and keep her from floating off. She appreciates it more than Sirius probably knows.

Remus lies back in the grass, overgrown hair whipping in the wind. He's facing the Sanctuary, though, and though Mary can't see his face, she knows he's not closing his eyes. Yí'ān sighs and sinks back against the stone. Their mismatched lot falls quiet and settles in to wait. To see what the night will bring.

Mary fades in and out of consciousness for a long time. At some point through the dull night, Sirius slips off her shoulder and ends up resting on her knee. Remus crawls over and lies with his head on Sirius' stomach, staring at the stars. The healer doesn't reach them. The hours wear onwards. Cold sweeps in; up here, they're still maritime, and it's not as cold as it could be, but it's horribly windy. Someone passes a thin fleece blanket down the line. Mary, Sirius and Remus share it.

When he's able to raise his arms again, Yí'ān conjures a small ball of fire to sit between them all, hovering in mid-air and emanating faint warmth. The only one of them who can use magic (at the moment, Sirius decidedly doesn't count; he hasn't raised his arm an inch since Remus got here), he offers warming charms and water but not much else, too tired for more than that. He doesn't share the blanket and refuses it three times in a row when Sirius tries to push it on him.

"I'm fine," he promises, folding his hands under his armpits.

"Just like Berlin all over again," mutters Sirius.

"This is nothing like Berlin," Yí'ān defends, "that's a terrible comparison to make."

"You're being just as fucking braindead."

Remus looks between them helplessly. He pulls the blanket a bit tighter around himself and glances at Mary, who rolls her eyes, about the only thing she can do; even her face is getting hard to maneuver, though she tries to convince herself it's just the cold.

"Berlin," he says stallingly.

"I'll explain it someday soon," promises Sirius. Frustrated, he looks away from Yí'ān and across the field towards the building, whose lights have begun to blink out. Tentatively, he touches Remus' hair. They act like they'll be like this forever. Constantly pushing away but unable to unstick fully from the other's side.

With disciplined effort, Mary manages to tilt her neck ever so slightly until her head rolls to the right. The light of the Sanctuary has begun to make her head hurt something awful. Now, all she can see is the dark of the sloping hillside, leading down into the chasm of thick trees below, unmoving but for the wind rustling through them.

At her side, she hears Remus whisper to Sirius, "God, I'm tired."

"Sleep, then," Sirius replies.

“Watch.”

“I’ll stay up for you.”

There’s a bit of a pause there, almost a practiced rhythm. Then Remus murmurs, “You can’t say stuff like that. You can’t just... you...”

“Me?”

“You have to tell me about Berlin.”

“And you have to tell me about Lambeth.”

“That’s not as important.”

“Remus.”

“Sirius.”

Mary stares into the darkness. She suddenly feels wide awake. “Hey,” she mumbles. “Look.”

“We’ll stop,” concedes Remus. “Sorry, Mary. We’ll let you sleep.”

“I just wanted—” Sirius starts.

“We need to do this another time—”

“Hey,” Mary repeats. “Look. Down there.”

Curiously, Sirius and Remus both sit up, leaning across her to peer down the hillside. In the darkness far below, there are two figures taking the long hike up towards them, one far taller than they are. Mary can’t make out any of their features.

“Huh,” Sirius says. “More refugees, I guess.”

Yí’ān shuffles around, rousing from half-sleep. “Wh—?”

“Nothing. Just some more people arriving.”

“Hmmp.” He closes his eyes again and goes still, arms folded.

Sirius lies back down on Mary’s leg. “Not falling asleep,” he promises, even as he closes his eyes.

Sighing, Remus lies down too. “G’night,” he mutters.

“G’night.”

Mary tries to close her eyes and doze, but something keeps her on alert; she’s not sure what. She can’t stop peering at the two strangers, trekking up through the dark towards them. It’s not a hunted feeling — and she knows the hunt better than most — but a sort of intrigue. Like there’s something she needs to wait for.

They draw closer and closer. Through the blackness, if she strains, she thinks she can hear the distant buzz of their conversation, too far away to pick out language, let alone words.

Sirius shifts around a bit to get comfortable on her leg. He seems disquieted too. None of them are trying to sleep, Mary realises faintly. They’re all waiting.

By the time the figures, silhouetted against the distant line of the sea, draw close enough to be heard, their difference in stature is even more pronounced. One huge and hulking, the other small and nimble.

“Fuck,” one is panting. English. “Can we stop for a minute? Your legs are longer than mine.”

There’s something muttered, too low for Mary to hear. Then, “Here. Look. Fire.”

They’re twenty feet away now. Mary squints, trying to make out features. Expressions. Anything. She gets the sort of floating feeling you get before an exam result or the announcement of a death in the family. A lightheadedness that starts right in your heart.

“They might let us sit nearby.” The girl — Mary thinks it’s a girl — raises her voice. “Can we come closer? We’re friendly.”

Mary squints. She says, “Sirius. Sirius.”

“Mmph.” Sirius sits bolt upright, staring at her rather than turning around. He murmurs, “Who is it? Are we fighting?”

“No,” Mary says, though in honesty, she isn’t sure. “Uh. Look.”

Sirius turns to look. Remus sits too. He stares out into the darkness, squinting. Hesitating.

Then he moves quicker than Mary has ever seen him move. One moment he’s on the ground and the next he’s on his feet.

“Oh, fuck!” Remus shouts. “*You!*”

The girl stops dead, stumbling over her feet. She’s in clunky snow boots, wrapped up in a heavy coat, close enough to the fire now that Mary can make out her features. Pale, thin face and shorn hair.

“Oh my god,” she gasps. “Remus!”

If there had been any tension between them before, it melts instantly. Remus and Lily sprint to each other and collide rather like fighting birds, crashing into each other. They grapple their arms tight around one another and spin with the impact, holding on as tight as they possibly can. Frantic, they stumble through the grass, half laughing, babbling a rush of questions that flows like a river from one to the other, none of them going answered.

“Oh my god!” Lily’s saying. “What are you doing here? I thought— I thought—”

“My letter!” shouts Remus. “You didn’t answer, I thought you’d died or something! Shit.”

Lily grabs him by the face and kisses both of his cheeks furiously, with great force. “Fuck, I missed you. Hungary. You were in Hungary. Sirius—”

She stops and stares over Remus’ shoulder, right at Sirius, who has frozen like a deer in the headlights.

“Shit,” Lily murmurs. And then, “Claude, don’t go—”

The tall one beside her steps into the light, a very twisted, conflicted look on their face. Mary cannot tell even in part what they’re thinking.

“You did not tell me,” they say evenly, looking right at Sirius.

“I didn’t know,” replies Lily. “I mean, Remus wrote to me, but— I didn’t think you’d come yet—”

“You didn’t write back!” Remus exclaims. “Why? I thought —”

Lily flushes. “I’ve been a bit busy,” she defends. “We just got back from Poland, we’ve been hunting—” And from her back she slugs a huge sack, rested over one shoulder, and holds it out in front of her. “A herd of porlock. Tracking them. For the... the cure.”

Her eyes find Mary.

“Hi,” Mary says lamely. “Lils.”

Lily seems to take it all in. She grabs Remus’ hand and pulls him back to Mary’s side, plopping down on the ground there.

“Fuck,” she says.

“Yeah,” agrees Mary. “Hug?”

“Will it hurt you?”

“Course not,” she lies.

Lily pulls her into a very gentle embrace, squeezing slightly around her back. She shuffles Mary’s head onto her shoulder and cradles it there. It feels like Lambeth again. Nightmares and Marlene. She still smells the same.

When eventually she pulls away, Lily looks over her shoulder at her companion. Claude. “Please don’t go,” she says, halfway exasperated and halfway pleading.

“I’m not going,” Claude says. They don’t move closer, though. “If you’ll excuse me, I have to take these—” They hold up their own sacks. “To the Sanctuary.”

They start around the little huddle, towards the light southbound, with long, sure strides. They make it about four paces before Yí'ān has stood up and crossed all the way to them, standing directly in their path. He's a full foot shorter than them. The pair of them glare at each other.

"No," Yí'ān says firmly. "Claude. No."

Claude tries to step around him. "I'm not a dog," they snap.

"Claude."

"Yí'ān."

"You're the worst," Yí'ān says. "You know that? No, look at me. Look me in the eye."

Claude refuses, looking firmly over the top of his head. "This is my job. I am here for a job. I get paid for this. Get out of my way."

Yí'ān puts a hand in the middle of their huge chest. "No," he says sharply. And, "Turn around. Right now. Turn around."

Claude scowls. "I've beaten you in a fight before," they warn, "I'll do it again."

"I'm just about at the end of my fucking rope," Yí'ān replies cheerfully, looking like he might properly murder someone tonight. "I could put you in the ground right now with Turn around."

They make hard, cold eye contact for five or six straight seconds. It's painful to watch. Then, stiffly, seeming to know they aren't going to win, Claude turns on the spot and looks directly at Sirius.

Sirius stares back, looking so forlorn and pathetic that if Mary didn't know any better, she would think he was putting it on. She knows him well enough, however, that she's aware it's just how he looks at this point in his life.

"Hi," Sirius says quietly. "Uh. Sorry."

Claude evidently didn't expect that. They visibly school their features and then turn back to Yí'ān and say, in a clear, tired voice, "Well, I'm going to—"

"No," Yí'ān snaps. "Back around. Now."

"I hate you."

"C'est réciproque."

"Do not speak French to me," Claude instructs. They spin all the way back around and call to Sirius, "You're done running, then?"

Sirius looks terrified at that. "I'm sorry," he says again. Mary watches him struggle to his feet. They look very similar, he and Claude. Long hair and built like they have only ever known war. "I'm so sorry."

Claude watches, face unchanging now. "I see."

"Claude," hisses Yí'ān. "Stop."

Ignoring him, Claude takes a step forwards and then another. "I haven't forgotten it," they say.

"I know," replies Sirius. "Me neither."

Another step. "And?"

“And I shouldn’t have left.” Sirius strides forwards until he’s right in front of them, staring up at them. Even shorter than Yí’ān, he might as well be something on the ground Claude is staring down at. “And I’m *sorry*.”

Remus shuffles close to Mary. He’s shivering with cold, or maybe it isn’t cold. He takes her hand in his. Mary remembers their conversation in the hospice and tries to squeeze it and doesn’t succeed.

“Fucking hell,” Lily mutters, very frustrated. “They could do this another time...”

“Sorry for?” Claude prompts.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake!” shouts Yí’ān. “You’re the worst!”

“Sorry for trying to leave you there,” Sirius says, barely pausing. “Sorry for running. Sorry for letting you drink the potion and making you drink it all. And I swear I’m not running anymore. I promise.”

Claude raises a thick, perfect eyebrow. “You’re not?”

“I swear,” Sirius says desperately. “Not anymore. Not ever again.” He points over his shoulder. “I got Remus back. And I promised him the same thing. I’m not leaving.”

There’s an anxious quiet. Sirius doesn’t move, though by the stiffness in his frame he’s ready to run.

“I,” Claude says after a moment. “Look at you.”

“I know it doesn’t seem sincere—”

“Shh. Zip.” Claude drops the sacks of animal carcass and pulls Sirius into a tight hug, huge hands patting his back.

Sirius flails and then grabs back. His shoulders jump. He's shaking. They murmur to each other, too far away to hear, neither letting go.

Yí'ān treks back to Mary's side, looking entirely finished with the whole affair.

"Christ," he says, sitting down heavily. "Claude is... is..."

"Mmm," Lily agrees. "I'm aware."

Yí'ān blinks at her. "Uh, Tsai Yí'ān," he greets, sticking a hand out.

Lily takes it. "Lily Evans."

"Ah. Remus' friend."

"Bit of an improbable situation we've ended up in here," Remus says lightly. "Poland...?"

"We're not back for long," Lily replies, speaking quickly. "We've got far more hunting to do before we can brew, we were out hunting the Porlock for weeks, we're way behind. It's for the *graben* ward, and..." She peers at Mary. "Mary, too. Jesus. What happened? Death eater? I thought you were dead." She pulls her into a tight hug again.

Mary appreciates it. "Well," she mutters. "Not quite yet. Getting there."

"Don't say that," Remus murmurs.

"There's still hope yet," Yí'ān agrees, "if you're looking for the stuff to put together a cure, that is."

"It's crippled us," Lily says grimly. "The *graben* curse, I mean. We've got a whole ward of people—"

Remus coughs. “You know it’s called the Ket—”

Sirius sits down heavily with them, and Claude beside him, who drops an arm around his shoulders.

“We made up,” Sirius says needlessly.

“No we didn’t,” Claude corrects. “I have not forgiven him.”

“I’m working for it,” Sirius agrees tiredly. He takes and squeezes Remus’ hand in his own.

Looking very conflicted, Remus hesitates, before asking, “Potion?”

“Another time.”

“...I’m getting tired of ‘another time’s.’”

Yí’ān reaches over to pinch Claude’s bicep hard. “You, you’re just. I don’t know why I tolerate you.”

Mary, feeling very lost, speaks up. “I don’t know what’s going on.”

“I think some explanations may be in order,” Sirius offers. “But quickly. Before Mary passes away.”

It’s not funny; nobody laughs.

Chapter End Notes

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KEEPERS

Chapter Notes

in a mania rn. my head is a ball of magma.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

James rolls over on the mattress and says, “Can we go for a walk?”

Dorcas isn’t asleep. She hasn’t been all the way asleep for weeks, it feels; she spends most of her days in a stumbling haze from which she rarely emerges. Half in slumber and half in a panic attack.

“What?” she mumbles, staring at the ceiling. Her mouth is thick and furry. She wants to brush her teeth.

James says it again. “Can we go for a walk? I can’t keep lying here, I’m going to go insane.”

Only then does Dorcas muster the energy to roll over in turn. She lies on her side facing him. James’ warm breath ghosts across her face. He watches her intently.

“You,” she says. “*You’re* going insane.”

“Yeah.”

“...Me too.”

“Then we should go.”

“The world’s ending outside,” Dorcas replies softly. The fire has spread around the east end and now, the smoke is so

thick it has begun to seep under the gap in the window pane and the smell of it is everywhere. James will choke if he tries to walk in it.

"I know," says James. He hesitates. "Please? Humour me."

"I'm not in the mood to humour you."

"Then maybe it'll make both of us feel better."

Dorcas hesitates. "Why ask me?"

"I like your company."

"That's not it."

"That's a part of it."

James shrugs his shoulders. Grunting, he sits upright. He peers through the room, jaw flexing. His face is all bones. "If I left on my own, you'd think I did it to die. Come on."

Knowing she isn't going to win this, Dorcas sits up too. She ghosts a hand over James' shoulder with the impulse to squeeze until it hurts and then decides against it. She's got a lot of things to be angry at and she can't afford to spend the last of the rage she has left in her on a midnight walk and a plea James isn't saying out loud. For absolution. For peace. To see the monster he has made.

In silence, they get dressed. There's no modesty left between them now. Dorcas barely feels human most days, let alone like she has a human body, and James' is barely still in one piece. He has no sanctity and thus nothing to hide. He pulls on three sweatshirts, probably to keep the ridge of his chest from pressing with too much prominence

through his clothes. Dorcas wears one of Mary's old hoodies and James' leather jacket.

Hesitating at the mattress, James takes the bat in his hands, staring down at it. "You reckon?"

"There won't be any death eaters out tonight. It's Sunday."

James looks at her like she's crazy. "They're not Christians, Dorcas."

"Even death eaters have homes to go back to." Dorcas takes the bat out of his hands. She drops it on top of the mattress. "If we get attacked, I can handle it."

"I wasn't saying you couldn't."

"Then we're good."

Tiredly, James nods. "I suppose so," he agrees. "Thanks."

When he dies, Dorcas wonders what'll happen to the bat. Who will take it; who will wield it after him, with more rage and less fatigue, most likely. She's taking the jacket. That's all she knows for certain of his inheritance.

They creep down the stairs together through the dark reaches of Hackney Terrace. Someone has left a roll of bandages on the stairs towards the ground floor, and an empty tin of magical bruise salve, the type they used to sell at Diagon Alley. James climbs over it and picks it up, turning it over in his hand with a faraway look on his face.

"Hey." Dorcas pulls at his elbow. She murmurs, "Let's go."

"Right," whispers James. He follows her the rest of the way down.

There is nobody in the kitchen. There's no sound in the whole place, now that Dorcas stops to listen. Only the creaking of the walls and the whistle of faint wind against the blacked-out windows. It feels like it was abandoned years ago. Someone has left the bread out on the kitchen table, uncovered, half sliced. It'll be stale by morning.

James peers into the kitchen beside her. "They're all probably at what's-his-face's funeral," he murmurs. Another recent death. They've started having to hold committals at Golders Hill Park, a fair walk away, abandoned now. They conduct the short, clinical ceremonies the day after the deaths. Gets them out of the way so nobody sits under their oppressive presence for long.

"Yeah," Dorcas agrees softly. "Let's go before they get back."

They sneak out through the front door, closing it quietly behind them. Dorcas presses the handle up inch by inch to make sure it doesn't snap and make a sound. Then, she turns, brushing elbows with James, to stare out across the street.

They both stand there for some time. There is nobody left on Hackney Terrace but for this hideout. Since the death eaters began raiding houses a few miles south, leaving them ransacked, the few remaining muggles have moved. Voldemort's people are hunting the Order. And they're getting closer by the day.

Under the red sky, too light for nighttime as it is set alive by smoke, Dorcas takes James' wrist in her hand. "Breathe," she whispers.

James takes a shallow, tentative drag. Something vibrates and whines in the back of his throat. He coughs, a silent,

breaking sound, barely a wheeze.

"I'm okay," he rasps. "We can walk."

"Not for long."

"Right."

Dorcas peers through the darkness. For once, she isn't afraid someone is watching her. She can't feel the eyes of the war, of the future, of Marlene and Mary on her. She can feel only herself and him.

"Where do you want to go?" she asks tentatively.

James swallows, throat bobbing. She doesn't have to look at him to know the look on his face.

"I've got an idea," he offers. "I don't think you've been there before. Remus and Lily and I had a mission there when we were still— still."

"...Is it far from here?"

"Nah. Few miles."

"Then lead the way," replies Dorcas.

"There might be dementors," James warns.

She smiles faintly. Why the fuck not, at this point. "I'll fight them off—"

"—For you," says Lily, and takes Mary's hand in hers, squeezing it tight enough that her knuckles pale. "Is it comfortable?"

Mary can't feel the bed beneath her any more than she can feel the fingers around her own. She clears her throat and it's as if something has come loose in there. She has no way to put it back.

"It's fine," she reassures. "Thank you."

Smiling gently, Lily glances around. She got Mary a bed by miracle— that's not the right word for it. Someone died an hour ago in this cot and Mary has taken their place. A miracle to her, but it won't stay that way. The ward is bustling with activity, nurses and healers rushing from bed to bed. Most of the infected here are on their last legs. It's almost too dark to see their faces, but if Mary squints straight ahead, she can make out the skeletal grimace of an old man opposite. Probably not an old man. He might have been a boy when he was cursed, for all she knows.

"Well," Lily says gently. "Did Sirius and Remus say where they were disappearing to? They shouldn't have left you—"

"To talk, I think," Mary replies. "About James. They think he's hurt. Or dead."

Lily's expression closes off. Mary doesn't know whether she'll cry or start shouting or both. But all she does is inhale sharply and look away, face a mask she cannot hold for long, as if the jagged edges of it are hurting her.

"I," she says eventually. "I guess I should try to find them. Ask about it. See what they know. God, *James*."

"The last I saw he was okay," says Mary. "If that means anything."

"I saw him after you—" Lily clears her throat. "After he'd thought you died."

“Remus told me. The train.”

“He killed someone. That day. It wasn’t pretty. Dorcas was there, too.” Lily forces a very fragile smile. “She’ll be thrilled to see you again.”

“If she’s still alive,” agrees Mary. And doesn’t say out loud, *if I’m still alive by then.*

Lily seems to hear the unspoken words in it. She shakes her head once with resolve. “She’ll see you again,” she promises. “I’ll make it so.”

Mary smiles, or tries to. She isn’t sure her face has moved at all. She knows what will come next. Her jaw will lock and her skin will go cold and deathless. She’ll only be able to groan and choke. She sees it all around her.

“I’m going to go find them,” Lily says eventually. “I’ll bring them back here, yeah? All three of us can keep you company—”

Mary takes all of her strength and puts it into her hand. With effort, she squeezes. “Don’t go yet,” she pleads. “Please. Just... not yet.”

Lily blinks at her. “I won’t be long.”

“I don’t want to be alone here.”

Across the room, out of Mary’s eyeline, someone screams with pain, mouth closed; the high gargle of it escapes from the flesh of the front of their throat, animal and wet.

Lily closes her eyes tight. When she opens them again, she looks at Mary and nods.

“Okay,” she agrees. “I’ll stay with you.”

With gentle care, she helps maneuver Mary across the mattress to lie on one side. Lily lies beside her, warm shoulder against hers, and holds her hand. Mary stares at the ceiling and Lily does the same. Neither speaks for some time.

“You’ve been in Poland, then?” asks Mary eventually.

“Yeah. Hunting. It’s been a while now.” Lily hesitates. “I didn’t want you to die.”

“I’ve heard that so many times in the last few weeks,” says Mary, feeling lightheaded.

Lily laughs, though it’s one of those breathy chuffing sounds you only make when you don’t have the energy to fake a real one. “I won’t say it again,” she swears.

“What was it like? Poland, I mean.”

“...Cold. We didn’t meet any other wizards. Slept in the wilderness, mostly.” Lily flexes her fingers a bit, as if she isn’t holding Mary’s hand but a blade instead. “I’d forgotten how nice warming charms were. I missed them.”

“I don’t remember what they feel like,” Mary admits.

“You will again someday,” pledges Lily. Seeming to know she has stepped across their unspoken division line, she squints at the heavy ceiling. Through the hot air, she continues, “I like hunting. It feels real. The war didn’t, sometimes. But the hunt does.”

“Porlock, was it?”

“Yeah. They’re most common in Ireland,” explains Lily.
“Solitary. They travel in packs and hide underground. We can’t exactly go back to Britain right now, not with... and Claude didn’t want to anyway. Reckoned they could track us a pack.”

“And they succeeded.”

“Yeah.” Lily smiles. “I killed a few of them. I’m not very good yet. But I’m okay with a knife.”

“All those years of cutting all our potions ingredients for us.”

Lily snorts. “Ha. I guess.” Her mirth fades. “It was lonely. But I think lonely was what I needed.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Looking at her, Lily nods once. “You know why I buzzed my hair?”

“Why?” obliges Mary, feeling like she’s looking at James instead. “Because it looks good?”

“It does look good,” Lily admits. “But it was because I didn’t want to look like myself anymore. I didn’t want to be...” She trails off. “I made a lot of mistakes, is what I’m saying. In school and out of it. And this was my fresh start, the sanctuary. Saving people. Keeping them safe.”

“Yeah.”

“And hunting... it was a lens. In my head. It made it all come into focus. Who I want to be.”

Mary wishes she could give her a hug. But all she can do is say, "And who's that?"

Lily shuffles closer. "I want to live," she says simply. "And make sure everyone else lives too. And that way, the other side won't ever win."

"I'm glad someone I know wants to be alive," says Mary, half joking.

"Oh don't say that. I'll have to go find them."

Mary would shake her head fondly. Instead, she just scoffs. "They're fine," she promises. "They have—"

"—Each other," Sirius sighs. "Don't we?"

"You don't get to say that," replies Remus. "God, I can't stop being angry at you. Why can't I stop being angry at you?"

Sirius doesn't seem to know what to say to that, and says nothing.

The night sky above has opened up above since they sat in the grass outside an hour ago. The black has gotten blacker and the stars against it more distinct, pressing out towards them as if growing closer. Remus read in a book once that the world will end in a shrink, all the stars pressing back inside of one another and colliding into a singularity. He wasn't sure at the time whether to believe it. Even now, he doesn't know for sure. He thinks it'll probably end far before such an event, though. That's about the only thing he's sure of.

Sirius sits up, leaning against him. Remus doesn't shove him off, because he doesn't think he's got the strength for

that. He allows it and even leans back in turn, until they have fitted together like a puzzle piece. Sirius hasn't read his letters yet. Said it wasn't the time. Remus is still convinced he never will. The stars blink, irony in them. Below, past the edge of the roof, all is quiet.

"Evans'll worry," Sirius says into the quiet, after some time. "We should go find her soon."

"Right," agrees Remus, not really listening.

"You two. You're close."

"All three of us were close." Remus tastes the memory more than sees it. Birthday cake and breakfast tea. "Lambeth. Months. Whole seasons."

"Yeah. I just didn't think you were..." Sirius doesn't need to say it.

Remus shrugs shallowly, a small motion, to keep Sirius' head between his shoulder and cheek. "A family," he fills in. "It wasn't like we could see our own. And James and I... James and I..."

Sirius stills for a second. "I'm proud of you," he says then.

"Not just me."

"Well. We'll see." There's an amount of bitterness there.

Remus resists the urge to move away, or to move closer, to kiss. To kiss again and feel something like he did in the hospice. Instead he does neither, caught in a lurch.

"He loves you so much," he says after a while. "You know that, don't you?"

“Too much, probably,” admits Sirius.

“Then trust me and take my word for it. If there’s one person alive who knows him better than you, it’s me.”

Sirius laughs hollowly. “Bet he’s all grown up. God, Moony, he was fifteen when I left. Peter was still fourteen. We were kids.”

The mention of Peter makes Remus feel mildly unwell. “Hey,” he murmurs. “I— fuck, why am I comforting you? I don’t know. But you didn’t leave on your own terms. That much is the only thing about the situation that doesn’t need... nuance.”

“Until the wedding.”

“After that I blame you, yes.”

Sirius looks away. “I thought you’d be in danger. You would have been in danger. I couldn’t do that to you. You didn’t see him at the wedding, Remus. Bleeding, and— and out of his depth by miles, he was— he—”

“You don’t have to say it.”

“But I do! I do, now that you hate me, or whatever. You deserve an explanation.”

“I don’t hate you,” Remus says quickly. “I could never hate you. Not if I wanted to.”

“Christ. Stop it. Don’t say— I—”

Remus pulls away and takes Sirius’ face between his hands. “I’m angry,” he says clearly and simply. “Very angry. And I probably will be for a while. But that doesn’t mean I’m not

happy you're here and it doesn't mean I'm not still in love with you. And it doesn't mean I don't think you and James are my home more than anywhere or anybody else."

Sirius sniffs. "Wales."

"Not anymore, no."

He pulls his face away. "Look at you." He gestures at Remus sharply. "Half dead, carrying those chains everywhere—and James, now, too. Galina. Claude. Regulus. Everyone I touch ends up hurt or dead or dying. You think I haven't been waiting for it to be you? You think I don't dream about it? He used to tell me— to tell me—"

The wind goes out of Sirius' sails. He slumps forwards and puts his head in his hands, feet hanging limp out over the dark chasm below them. He's close enough to the edge of the roof that Remus wishes he had the guts or strength or care to pull him away.

"He used to tell me," Sirius tries again, voice hardly more than a croak, before giving up.

Remus rests a hand on Sirius' shoulder. "Galina wasn't your fault," he murmurs.

"Of course it was."

"No, it wasn't. For whatever reason, she grabbed the ring. She would've done it whether you took her there or not."

Sirius shakes him off. "She saw resurrection and wanted it," he says gruffly. "I know that. God knows if I had recognised it, I would've done the same. We've both lost enough."

"Then she's dying for the loss of her love." *Just like me.*

“No. She’s dying because I led her there.”

“She’s an adult.”

“So was I!”

“You’re a scared teenager,” says Remus. “Look me in the face. Sirius. Sirius?”

But Sirius doesn’t turn to look at him. His hard eyes have widened and he’s peering out towards the horizon.

“Huh,” he murmurs, shaken from terrible thoughts into a more immediate, stilling fear. “Remus.”

Remus tears his gaze from Sirius and looks out into the darkness too. There’s the stretch of grass leading half a mile towards the sloping edge of the compound, where the wire fence sits, and past it, the hill slopes down steeply into a mass of dark forest, dense and hard-packed. He can’t see anything moving in the darkness.

“Sirius...?” he asks, under his breath as if they’re being stalked by some predator. He reaches out and takes Sirius’ hand.

Sirius doesn’t move an inch. He’s got a perfect stillness to him. It’s something Remus saw in him when they were younger. Hiding from teachers or Slytherins. The ability to perch as stiff as a bird on a line. His long hair sways around his shoulders and arms, loose and hanging in curls.

“Sirius,” Remus murmurs again. “Sirius, tell me what it is.”

Only then does Sirius rip his gaze away. He looks intently at Remus.

“There’s something out there,” he says, before looking back. “Look. East side of the slope. Way down at the bottom.”

Remus blinks down. He can see nothing. Only the trees and, beneath them, dense foliage. At the very bottom, a black mass, trees or bushes.

“I don’t see anything,” he starts, squinting.

Then, Remus’ eyes adjust. Those aren’t bushes.

The alarm that rips through the lower levels of the sanctuary makes them both stand to attention. Neither of them is the flinchy sort.

“Well, then,” says Yí’ān, with sporting optimism. “We’re fighting?”

“We were already fighting,” Claude replies unhelpfully.

“You’re not funny, you know.”

“I’m sort of funny,” Claude rebukes. They pull their wand out and poke Yí’ān in the cheek with it. “Come.”

Both of them take off down the hallway together to the front doors, which are swarmed already by a crowd of mostly teenagers trying to get a look outside.

Yí’ān raises his voice. “Let us through!” he calls. “Get upstairs, quickly, whatever it is, you don’t want to be here for it—”

A little kid grabs at him, clutching Yí’ān’s sleeve. “What is it? What’s happening?”

Yí'ān kneels down in front of him, forcing a smile. "It's probably a false alarm," he says gently. "Those happen all the time. But just in case, I need to make sure you get somewhere safe, okay? We'll protect you. I promise."

The kid, wide-eyed, nods once. "Who are you?" He's British.

Yí'ān smiles still, serene and in-control. He's good at this: protection, calmness, nurture. He's gotten significantly better at it as of late. "A friend," he promises. "Now go on. If you're quick, they'll still have seats and you won't have to sit on the floor!"

Hesitantly, the child nods. He takes off with the rest of the crowd.

Claude pulls Yí'ān up by his upper arm. Their face is very stony. "Bleeding heart."

"Had to be one of us," Yí'ān replies promptly. "Come on."

Together, they push out of the cleared doors and into the cold night air, which hits Yí'ān like a wall. He stumbles over a knoll in the grass and looks around, chin raised, wand hot against his palm.

There's no immediate danger — or rather, no immediate danger which he can see. Across the grass are fleeing the last of the refugees, who have heard the alarm and seem to know they're safer inside. Families and children alike.

Yí'ān ushers them inside. "Find a member of staff," he tells one mother. "They'll tell you where to go."

"You have room?!" someone asks him.

Yí'ān winces. "We'll make room," he promises. "Go, please —"

Ahead, in the darkness, Claude peers around, marching down towards the slope with intent in each footfall. They hold their wand in one hand and their knife in the other. Yí'ān watches their back and their blind spots on either side. This feels familiar; this feels like something they've done a million times, because they have, because they probably always will.

The last of the refugees flow inside. Yí'ān jogs out onto the grass to Claude's side and watches the fence, which is unmoving, only rattling occasionally with the wind whipping through its coils.

"Do you see anything?" he asks them.

They shake their head once. "No I don't," they say in Icelandic, which they only ever use to talk to him when they don't want to be overheard. "Yourself?"

"No," says Yí'ān stiffly. "Come on. Let's get to the fence."

As one they run to the fence, quiet and quick. Claude moves like a shadow against the night. Yí'ān, less stealthy but lighter and smaller, makes barely a sound. They reach her iron lattice and stare through the holes to the decline below.

"Huh," says Yí'ān. "I wonder who called in the—"

Claude takes his arm in an iron grip. They say, in quick, quiet words, tumbling over each other, "There's a lot of them. Okay. *Fuck*. Get back there, I'll put up a few wards to get us started, enough to hold them off. Go!"

Yí'ān stares at them like they're insane. "Excuse me?"

Claude turns to look at him. Their gaze is intense and dark and everything Yí'ān has ever known it to be. They mean business.

"Death eaters," they say simply. "Or whatever the fuck their stupid name is. Look."

Yí'ān looks back. That's when he sees them. He is not a hunter; he was barely a cursebreaker back in the day, just the gun where Claude was the bullet, and he's not built to track and kill, only to aid. But he sees them all the same.

"Oh, Christ above," Yí'ān says, "wow. Alright then, we're doing this. Stay alive."

Claude raises their wand high. "Stay alive," they tell Yí'ān, nodding. Then, they begin to chant.

Yí'ān sprints back to the doors, no longer taking care for stealth or quiet, only speed. Grass sinks beneath the soles of his boots. He reaches them in time for yet more of the Sanctuary's people to pour through. Germans mostly, chattering anxiously.

"Death eaters," gasps Yí'ān. He reaches the wall and leans against it. "My friend is already warding; they're coming up the hill. We need to fight."

"Who are you?!" someone demands.

"I'm about to save your lives," Yí'ān replies breathlessly, and turns to look up at the dark sky, stars already fading behind a glassy ward. He raises his wand and starts to cast too.

More and more of the Sanctuary's keepers emerge into the darkness, speaking in hushed voices, fanning out across the grass. They stand at the fence and stare through the darkness. A few of them try to stop Yí'ān and demand his name, his purpose; he ignores them studiously. Minutes later, they take up the chant as well.

By now, the light of spellfire has begun to taint the sky over the forest in burnished yellow and gold and angry red. Yí'ān thinks that over his own spellwork, he can hear footsteps en masse, drawing closer and closer up the hill they all climbed mere hours ago. Approaching.

A sheer film of silver magic spreads in a doom atop the sanctuary, descending into the hills around it. Its power and heat whips up a strong wind inside like a snow globe, tearing grass and dust from the ground in a small vortex.

Claude looks over their shoulder at Yí'ān from the fence, wand still aloft. They flip the knife in their other hand and grin.

Scared out of his fucking mind, Yí'ān grins back, because what else can he do? They've been here before and will be here again.

"Who do you fight for?" someone demands of him in passing, pressing out of the doors with silver light across their back. An older man with greying hair. Neumann, if Yí'ān's guess is right. "Who are you here with?"

Yí'ān pauses in his chanting for a moment to say, "I'm fighting for you right now, sir, so you should figure out an evacuation model fast, or none of us are—"

“—Going anywhere,” Lily promises breathlessly, clambering off the bed. She grabs Mary’s face and kisses her forehead once, with force. “I just need to step out for a sec to see what’s going on, okay? I promise. I’m not going anywhere. I’ll be back.”

In bed, Mary groans. “You never change,” she replies tiredly, “Go.”

“I’ll be back,” promises Lily again. She tears out of the room and runs.

The alarm is the muggle bell type, not a wizarding caterwaul. It reminds her of fire drills in primary school, an ear-splitting sound that rings through the packed halls and drives her halfway insane. The corridor outside is packed with milling people, hiding as high up in the building as they can get, uncertain where they’re supposed to be.

“Stay calm,” Lily assures as she pushes through. “Everyone stay calm, please— excuse me, sorry—”

Someone shouts at her in German. There’s a scuffle and a shout ahead; somebody falls a few steps down the stairs, a child, and starts to cry. Great. The last thing she needs. Swallowing her pride, Lily shoves through the crowd and to the staircase, clambering past the crying kid and taking off.

Along with the alarm is chatter, screaming, shouting. Someone is laughing manically somewhere, someone else cheering; spellfire rings outside, along with the high, reedy vibrations of warding. Overhead, the lights flicker. Lily makes it to the floor below and tears into an abandoned meeting room.

Inside, it’s dark, the skeleton frames of a table and chairs stark against the light outside. She doesn’t close the door

behind her, running to the balcony and throwing the doors open. Wind has whipped up and it buffets through her clothes and chills her to the bone.

A huge silver dome has sprung to life around the sanctuary, from the foot of the fence to the hills behind it. At its front stands Claude, huge form a black silhouette against its light, and there are more figures scattered through the grass putting up their own wards, colours melding together in a heady kaleidoscope overhead. Beyond it, a dark mass is marching up the hillside, hundreds of cloaked figures. The sky is full of them too. Dementors, closing in across the ocean. Far away but getting nearer.

War drums striking up inside her chest, Lily presses against the banister. She can't see any more refugees outside, only workers and keepers. Good. She stands straight and hesitates— she has no weapon, no wand— but this vantage spot is one of the best in the building—

“Hey!” calls a voice from behind her. “Remus, I found her! Evans!”

Lily wheels around. Sirius Black is standing in the doorway to the meeting room with his arms piled high with bottles. Remus skids into view beside him, looking crazed and carrying his own set. They run to her; Remus kicks the door closed behind him with his heel.

“What—” Lily starts.

“Potions ingredients,” Sirius says. He crashes out onto the balcony and descends to his knees, putting his load down. “Remus said you know how to make— cocktails? Or something?”

Lily blinks. Remus kneels down too, and without thinking, she crouches down and throws her arms around him.

“You remembered!” she says. “Remus, you—”

“I know!” Remus replies quickly. “I love you too, but we don’t have much time, we should probably start—”

“Right,” Lily says, pulling herself together. She lets go. “What have you got?”

“Uh,” says Remus, “bitter root, bicorn horn, leaping toadstool, cowbane, lobalug venom, erumpent horn— we stole it from, uh, your big friend’s lab. Their name was on the door. We figured they wouldn’t mind.” Then, looking crazed, he reaches into his pocket. “I’ve got a gun, too.”

“He’s gone mad,” Sirius murmurs. He sounds punch-drunk or lovestruck. Probably both.

“He went mad a long time ago,” Lily replies, feeling frazzled. “Okay. Gun down for now, until they make it through the wards, anyway. We’re brewing. Someone get me a fucking cauldron.”

Sirius starts spreading potions ingredients out in a row in front of them while Remus fishes around in his sack for a collapsible cauldron. Below them, there are more shouts, and more and more fighters pour onto the green. Glancing down, Lily thinks she sees Clara there. Probably looking for her. But there’s no time to go to her now.

“God,” says Remus. He peers up at Lily for a moment and grins. “Even back in the PA days, I never thought we’d actually—”

“—Be here,” says the kid hiding beside Mary’s bed. “But shh, okay? I didn’t know where else to go.”

Mary can’t turn to look at him, but she can still hear him. Her eardrums haven’t given out on her yet. Around the bed and past it, the room is in the throes of blind chaos. A healer is trying to barricade the door; there are shouts and screams, groans, sobbing. People push at the door, trying to get in out of the crush outside. Lights flash outside through gaps in the curtains.

She drags a breath in and holds it in her lungs. “What’s your name?” she asks.

A pause. “Mattias.”

“Mattias. I’m Mary.”

He scoots around the bed a bit. He’s crouched down beside it, half beneath it. His head sticks up over the side and he peers at her. He’s just a kid, eleven or twelve at most.

“Mary,” he murmurs. “What’s happening?”

Mary has no idea. But she’s got suspicions. By the way the healers are acting, this has never happened before. It’s definitely not a protocol drill. There’s one in the corner she can see the faint outline of piling potion vials and bandages into a sack as if planning to run with them. Someone has overturned the medicine trolley and it lies in the middle of the room, between two beds, on its side and surrounded by shattered glass and needles.

“I don’t know,” she murmurs. “I’m sure it’ll be okay, though.”

“Really?”

She isn't sure. She isn't sure of anything and hasn't been for a long time.

"Take my hand?" Mary asks breathlessly. She tries to wiggle her hands. "I don't want to be alone."

Mattias stares at her. Slowly, he reaches for her hand and takes it in his. He's got small fingers. She can't feel it but imagines she can. She's back at Hogwarts for a moment. In the dorm stretching to grab Dorcas' hand in the next bed along, stretching to fill the distance between them. Holding her fingers out and brushing warmth with their tips.

"You're *gegraben*?" he asks quietly.

Mary tries to smile. "I'm not as sick as the others," she promises. "It's not contagious. I promise."

"Yeah. My friend told me about it. The curse." His eyes stray to her bandaged stomach. Nobody has tucked Mary beneath the sheets; she lies atop them. "Does it hurt?"

"A bit," Mary admits. She feels like she might cry suddenly. "But I'm being brave."

"Brave," Mattias nods, as if this is a familiar concept to him.

"Yeah." Trying to smile, Mary feels — truly feels — burning behind her eyes. Her lip trembles and she tries to catch it between her teeth, the skin tingling. The whole room blurs. She sobs once.

"Please don't cry," Mattias murmurs sadly. "I dunno what to do."

"I'm okay," promises Mary, trying to gather her breath. It feels like all she does is cry. She wants to be brave like Lily

and strong as Marlene but she's not, she can't be, and she's never going to get the chance to be at this rate, with the walls shaking and the ceiling probably close to falling on them.

Mattias crawls up to sit on the bed beside her, in the spot Lily left. He doesn't let go of her hand, peering at her still. "Tell me what to do," he demands.

"You don't need to do anything," Mary rasps. Her face is wet and she can't even wipe her eyes. She blinks furiously, the motion twitching a muscle in the side of her face that stings like fire. She's coming apart into many small pieces. "I'm alright."

There's a blast below; the windows tremble violently, the sound horrific. One of them cracks with a sound like a gunshot. There are screams. Dust falls in small sheets from the ceiling, fine and white as snow. Some of it lands on Mary's chest.

She's tired of lying. Tired of the New War; of Sirius, of everything. She wants to only tell the truth for the rest of forever.

Mattias cowers closer to her in the darkness. He lies beside her and presses his face into the pillow, flushed with tears.

"Hey," coos Mary, because it's all she can do. "Hey, you're okay. You're going to be alright. We'll be alright."

"The death eaters—"

"It's not them," she promises. "It's... fireworks. Because it's almost Christmas."

Mattias peers up at her. "But what if it's the death eaters really?"

"It's not."

"But if it is?"

Someone far below outside screams. It echoes furiously around, reverberating through the hills. Mary closes her eyes tight and then opens them again, determined not to do this wrong.

"Then you'll still be safe," she promises. "My friends are out there fighting. They're very strong."

"Really?"

"The strongest."

Looking dubious, Mattias frowns. "But the death eaters are strong too."

"It isn't death eaters. And they're not that good," Mary contests.

His eyes dart to the wound. "They did that to you."

Mary closes her eyes. She breathes in deeply and exhales, counting to ten. "And I'm going to be just fine," she says after a while. "Promise."

The windows rattle again. Mattias burrows further into the pillow and his shoulders begin to jerk. With effort, Mary looks to the window, where bright flashes of colour stain the sill, red and orange, purple and blue. Like strange tropical fish. They linger there for a moment and then they're gone.

"I promise," she murmurs. "I promise you, you're going to be okay. Just—"

"—Trust me!" Lily bellows, before lurching up to her feet and hurling the magical molotov cocktail overarm into the fray below.

Her aim is true; it soars, spinning, over the heads of the keepers and into the black mass of robed death eaters pushing through the far edge of the ward. Lily watches with slightly sadistic intent as it explodes against the grass there in a burning ball of green flame, which leaps up to rise high and broad, higher than any fire she has ever seen. Death eaters scatter out of the way, throwing themselves to the ground and rolling to extinguish their robes.

"Fucking hell!" Sirius shouts. "That was good! *Kaboom!*"

Remus, crouching against the railing with the barrel of his revolver poking over the side, turns to look at Lily like she's gone mad. "I know I said fire," he says, "but oh my god, that's a lot of fire!"

Grinning until her face hurts, Lily begins loading another vial up with potion, gloves chafing her hands; they were made for Claude and they're far too big. "They had it coming!"

"Yeah," Sirius agrees. "Watch your hand, oh my god—" He reaches out to steady her pour, holding the cauldron with his working arm. "Hell, you're crazy."

"Yeah," snorts Lily. "And you look great in this situation."

He grins at her wildly. "Where's the lighter? I'll toss the next one."

“We’ve only got enough potion for a few,” Lily warns.
“Careful.”

“I’ve got a good aim,” he promises. “Even with my left hand.”

Lily tucks a scrap of fabric into the top of the vial and holds it still as Sirius lights it. He stands up, winding back, and wallops the flaming bottle over his head with incredible speed. It soars like a bullet through the air and collides with a pack of death eaters skirting around the eastern edge of the dome. Some of them manage to dodge it and others don’t. The screams are horrific.

When Sirius crouches back down, he doesn’t look the slightest bit remorseful. Lily remembers, as she looks at him, what James told her about the wedding. He cruciated one of the Rosiers and didn’t stop to think about it. He did it with James’ wand.

“What?” he asks, as Lily stares.

She shakes herself. “Nothing. Good aim.”

Sirius smiles. “Another.”

They hurl two more into the oncoming death eaters, who pour by the dozen through a tear they have ripped in the wards. Handfuls of them have made it around to the back of the Sanctuary and are attacking from there, trying to destabilise the foundations.

Remus begins firing off bullets once the death eaters are close enough to get a good shot at, crouched low with his eyeline at the barrel. He squints, concentrating, not looking at either of them. Sirius keeps his dead hand on Remus’

ankle. Lily can't tell if he's rested it there accidentally or on purpose.

"There's fucking tons of them," Remus grunts, after the fourth molotov. "Shit. They're still coming."

Lily crouches at his side. "Any luck with that?"

"I've got a few in the knees," says Remus.

"You're not shooting to kill?" Sirius demands.

Remus looks at Sirius like he's asked a stupid question. "What if I get one of our own?!"

"They're wearing masks! It's not as if it's hard to tell—"

"Hey," Lily cuts in. "Stop it."

Sirius whips his head around to look at her. "But—"

Raising a hand, Lily shakes her head. "Nope. If Remus doesn't want to kill anybody, then he's not killing anybody. Remus, keep firing."

Shooting her an appreciative look, Remus turns back to his gun. Lily crouches back down over the cauldron and begins pouring out another.

Sirius kneels beside her. Voice lowered, he hisses, "We can't afford to let them live— a death eater with blown-out knees can still shoot!"

"I know that!" Lily says frustratedly. "But not everybody is you or James." *Or me.*

He glares. "Come on. Put all of it in this last one, give it some welly."

“I was planning on it,” she says stiffly. “Let me focus.”

Sirius holds the cauldron steady. Lily pours the last of their potion inside until it’s almost overflowing. She presses the tip of the rag inside gently, trying not to spill much. Sirius lights it.

“I’ve got it,” he says, taking the vial and turning back towards the fray below. Lily watches spell-light glow up against his face, underlighting his features, casting him into an unearthly glow.

Sirius whips his hand back, takes aim, and then falters. His arm falls limp to his side. He’s staring at something below.

Fire continues to lick up the fabric. Any moment now, it’ll explode.

“SHIT!” Lily shouts.

Launching to her feet, she grabs the vial from Sirius and hurls it herself, out across the battlefield, where it lands ten feet from a group of death eaters duelling a handful of keepers, sending them all scattering away. It might have bought them a few seconds of time, but that’s it.

Lily rounds on Sirius. “What the fuck?!” she demands. “What were you—”

Sirius pushes her out of the way. He leans against the railing, hands on it, and belows, “CLAUDE! *YÍ’ĀN!*”

Lily feels her heart stop. She presses against the banister at his side. Remus stops firing and stands too, trying to get a better look.

Far below them, two figures shamble through the smog and haze towards the doors of the sanctuary. One tall and one far shorter. They come into the light and Lily catches a glimpse of Claude and Yí'ān, the former holding up the latter. Wandless and limp, Yí'ān is pouring blood from a deep head wound and staggering, barely on his feet.

Sirius doesn't say a word to either of them — he just turns and runs.

"Fuck," Lily mutters. "Okay. Remus, stay here— keep firing, pick them off if you can, just— I'll go get him!"

Remus nods, biting his lip. "Keep him alive!"

Nodding, Lily says, "Don't have too much mercy, okay?"

A beat. "Okay," he agrees. He spins the chamber of his revolver and crouches down again, aiming.

Lily sprints out of the room and into the crowded hallway. She sees the dark blur of Sirius dashing down the stairs to her left and runs after him.

On the ground floor, everything is foggy. Smoke from outside has begun to pour in through the doors and windows and the ceiling has shaken loose an age of dust which hangs thick in the air, making Lily cough and hack. Through the gloom, all the lights blown out, she spies Sirius slipping out of the front doors. She darts to them in his wake and almost falls over him on the doorstep, where he has crouched on his knees.

"Shit," Lily says. "Oh, that's—"

Claude has laid Yí'ān against the wall beside the entryway. The wound is bad, deep and crooked, pressing into the

skull. There's definitely something broken and it's bleeding profusely, pouring down across Yí'ān's face and neck. He has his head tilted up and his eyes on the sky, slightly unfocused.

Sirius takes one of his hands in his left one and loses balance, falling and then pressing forwards again until he's sitting tight to Yí'ān's side with his knees drawn up to his chest. "Hey. Hey. Can you hear me? Yí'ān—"

Yí'ān lets out a faint, tired groan. "I'm not dead," he says idly, not taking his eyes off the sky.

"Look at me," Sirius pleads. "Yí'ān. Look— look at me. Please. *Please.*"

Seeming to hear the distress, Yí'ān rolls his head around to look at Sirius. "Oh, bollocks," he murmurs. "Don't get upset. Please don't get upset."

"Don't talk like that," Sirius snaps. "You're fine."

Claude crouches at Yí'ān's other side. With businesslike purpose, they reach into their jacket and pull out a vial of what Lily knows to be dittany.

"Stay still," they instruct Yí'ān sternly. "Hear me? Stay still." And then something in Norwegian.

Yí'ān laughs harshly, throat cracking with it. "I heard you." He closes his eyes.

Sirius squeezes his hand so tightly that Lily hears the bones creaking. "Stay awake."

"I am awake."

“Then don’t go anywhere.”

Yí’ān blinks one eye open. He smiles crookedly through the blood. “Not planning on it,” he promises. “*Shit*, Claude. Warn a guy? That hurts, Christ. That hurts. God.”

“I’ll show you hurt in a minute,” Claude warns, and snaps off a joke in tense French that Lily only half understands. Sirius doesn’t laugh but Yí’ān seems to think it’s very funny, giggling, head lolling.

The wound is terrible, one of the worst Lily has ever seen, which is saying a lot after all this time in the Sanctuary. She puts a hand on Sirius’ shoulder and squeezes very tight. She cannot have another James — she knows, on some primordial level, that she couldn’t take the strain of another’s heartache on her shoulders again. Her hands aren’t made for holding people together. They’re made to protect and to protect herself in turn. If there are breakdowns on the battlefield tonight she’ll kill somebody herself.

But Claude seems determined not to give up hope. With the same deft, clean motions Lily has seen them hack apart carcasses with, they press the tip of their wand to the wound and begin to wrangle the skull back into shape piece by piece.

“It’s not enough,” they say through gritted teeth, remarkably calm. “But it’ll keep you alive until we get a healer. Yí’ān, don’t go to sleep or I’ll kick you in the balls. *L’amour de ma vie, Sirius regarde. Si tu meurs devant lui—*” They flick their wand to dislodge a chip of skull from Yí’ān’s eyebrow. “—I’ll have to deal with that, and I think you’re better than me, no?”

Yí'ān laughs again. "You're not wrong," he rasps. "And that was very sweet, *ma grande*."

"Oh, shut up."

Sirius stares between them both like they're insane. "*Es-vous cinglé?! Vous me rends dingue!* Fuck!" And then he laughs hysterically, the sound breaking at the edges.

Yí'ān raises a hand to pat the side of Sirius' face gently. "I'll be okay," he says. "Takes more than this to get me down."

"He's not lying," Claude agrees, not looking away from the wound they're deep into. "This is fixable. If we get a healer on hand soon, we can make sure there's no permanent damage."

Lily darts to her feet. "I can get one," she says, "I'll run to the infirmary."

Claude looks up at her for a scant moment. They nod once. "In a second. Watch my back for now. Sirius, listen to me closely."

Still in pieces, Sirius nods, shuffling closer. "Anything, yeah," he croaks.

Reaching out with their wandless hand, Claude rests it around the back of his neck and presses there. "You promised me," they say quietly. "You promised me that you would be brave now."

Sirius nods furiously. "Yeah," he agrees.

"You swore it."

"Yes."

“Then I need you to do this.” Claude reaches to their back and unsheathes their long knife. They press it into Sirius’ hands.

Sirius stares at it. He looks back up at them. “What—”

“I think you know what,” Claude replies. “I need someone out there on the field for me. To take my place.”

“I can’t.”

“Yes, you can.”

“It won’t work anymore! It never does— not without—”

“Without what?” Claude demands. “Without me there? Without the lack of real danger?”

Sirius falls silent. Then, he says, “I’ve been *trying*. It doesn’t work. Trust me. If anybody wants it to, it’s me.” He flops around his hand for emphasis, the dead one.

“Then use my knife and use it well.”

“Left-handed I’m weak on one side—”

“Sirius,” Claude snaps. “You made a promise. To me and to Galina.”

Sirius freezes. By the light of flashing spells, Lily sees his face change imperceptibly, a million emotions in it.

Then, he closes his fist around the knife and stands up.

“You promise he’ll be okay?” he asks breathlessly. “Promise me.”

“I swear it,” Claude says.

Yí'ān grins up at Sirius. "Give 'em hell," he says. He seems to sober and says, with painful sincerity, "I love you. Sirius, we all love you. So much."

Sirius stares from Yí'ān to Claude. He closes his eyes and a small smile grows on his face.

"I love you too," he says, and sounds, for the first time in all the years Lily has known him, like he's at peace.

Then, he turns and plunges into the fray. Lily sees, before the smoke has consumed him, his hand light up at his side, alive and moving.

"Alright," she announces. "Since you wanted me here for your inspirational speech—"

"Don't be smart with me," says Claude, not looking up. "Go."

Lily doesn't respond; she's already running.

Remus spends thirty seconds with his gun trained on one death eater in particular who looks particularly nasty. He's not sure why but something about the guy, even with the mask on, gives him a bad feeling, so he hasn't taken his eyes off him for a moment. He feels rather unhinged.

Alone up here, he wishes he had written James one last letter, said one last goodbye. Written to Huw again, maybe, who he ghosted a month ago now and hasn't reached out to since. Told somebody he was still alive. Even his father might have been enough.

But there's no use in thinking like that now. Remus has a job to do.

As he watches, the death eater stills for a moment, turning towards the Sanctuary. If he can just get a good shot in the side of the knee...

Something bright and fast barrels into the man and sends him flying. At first, Remus thinks it's a spell— but it's a person, alight with magic, cracking with it.

In a trance, he lowers his gun and stares.

Sirius is in the midst of the fighting, knife in one hand and his other thrown out at his side, crackling with white electricity that burns beneath his skin like fire. He's got a maddened look on his face, not quite a grin but not a grimace either, and hell is raining around him like it's 1976 again and the war is young, and he is young, and he is about to send James staggering home a bloody mess to Remus' door. But he isn't young anymore. And all he has in his hands but the knife and the power is one shot at fixing this.

Remus has one of those too. He raises his gun.

At the wards, there's a fierce crack. Sirius doesn't seem to hear it; he keeps rocketing through the death eaters like they're bowling pins, knocking them down one by one, ducking spells and curses and not stopping, as if unable to stop his momentum. Remus looks up.

There's a flicker in the dome, in its light; at the edge and along the top, darkness is pressing in. Dementors. The wards won't last minutes against them.

It hits Remus in a rush that they are entirely outnumbered.

"Fuck," he says, falling back from the banister and landing on the floor in a heap. "Shit. God, I—"

There's nobody here to answer him. Just Remus and the stars, which blink through the dome as it stutters, but soon even they will fade out, leaving behind only— he can hear it now— *I promise you'll see me again. There are just things I... I can't say...*

Firmly, Remus shakes himself. If he dies here, and if Lily and Sirius die too, James has nobody left. And as rotten as he's been to James, as they have been to each other, he cannot do that to him. So he needs to pull himself together and think of a plan. Any plan.

"Okay," Remus murmurs. "Shit." He stands up and bolts from the balcony, keeping his gun out.

The hallway outside is deserted now. Everyone must have crammed in upstairs or left to fight, mostly the former. Remus pounds down the stairs two at a time and bursts out into the foggy night, barely ducking beneath a stray spell, which fizzes into the wall beside him.

"This guy," croaks a tired voice to his left.

Remus whips around. Yí'ān is collapsed against the wall with that nasty head wound wide open across his hairline, gruesome and bare. Beside him crouches tall, broad Claude. They don't look up from their work healing.

"Hi," says Yí'ān mildly. "Sirius is holding his own just fine, if you were wondering—"

"I know," Remus says quickly. "We're outnumbered. I'm going to call for reinforcements."

Yí'ān squints. "We haven't lost yet."

"We're about to. The wards are starting to fall."

“Fuck.”

“Yeah. Dementors.”

“Oh,” grimaces Yí’ān. “I thought I could hear dad’s heart monitor. Thought it was my own.”

“We’re not that high-tech,” grunts Claude. They shoot Remus a brief, interrogating glance. “Reinforcements from where?”

Remus squares his jaw. “London.”

“London burned.”

“Not yet. And I know how to get there.”

Claude frowns. They nod once. “Be quick,” they advise.

Remus sprints out into the battlefield, dodging around a tussling keeper and death eater rolling through a patch of green flame. The smoke is horrendous, so thick it’s like a liquid; you could breathe it in. He can barely see beyond a few feet ahead, and bodies move in the shadows around him. Friend or foe, he can’t tell.

Ahead, a brilliant white light shines in mottled rays through the dust. Remus hurtles towards it, hand outstretched in front of him, and trips over a body but doesn’t stop running; he takes Sirius’ wrist in his hand.

Sirius spins around to look at him. By the firelight, Remus can see a bit of blood on his face from a thin wound and a bloody nose.

“Remus,” he pants. “Fuck, you’re not meant to be out here — run!”

“No.” Remus squeezes that wrist tight. “You need to listen to me. Come on.”

He pulls Sirius from the fray. They dodge beneath a green hail of curses and past a miasma of spellfire against the dome’s eastern wall to the side of the Sanctuary, where the building casts long, ghostly shade across the ground, purple and blue against the red and gold of the battle.

“What the fuck—” Sirius starts, “I made a promise—”

“You can keep your promise,” Remus says quickly. “I swear. You can come back and fight until there’s nothing left of you. Just listen to me for a sec. Okay? Listen to me.”

Sirius slumps against the wall. He raises both hands — both hands, both, he is alive as he has been since Remus saw him at the end of fourth year — and puts them on either side of Remus’ neck, warm and full of electric pressure.

“Anything,” he agrees breathlessly. “What are we doing?”

Remus swallows. He’s not sure what he’s forcing down. Fear or guilt. Perhaps more love than he knows what to do with. “London.”

Sirius stares. “No.”

“Listen to me—”

“No!”

“Sirius!”

Sirius pulls away. “I said no!” he shouts. “Get off me, I’m fighting again—”

“Sirius!” With force, Remus grabs him by the shoulders and holds him in place. “Listen to me. For once in your life. For once. One time. That’s all I’m asking from you. *Once*. Even you can do that.”

Falling against the wall, Sirius scowls. “I can’t go back to Britain.”

“We’ll die if you don’t.”

“Wh—”

“We’re outnumbered.” Remus gestures around — to the shapes of the dementors against the wards, to the death eaters still pouring in. “Outmatched. We need reinforcements and we need them fast. There’s only one place that we can hope to find them and that’s the Order. And we both know there’s a good chance the Order is still in London.”

Sirius stares at him. “So?”

“So, you can apparate sidealong. You don’t get off the trace. We can go together, gather reinforcements— you can apparate them back. Sirius. James might be there, Sirius. And it’s our only option.”

“No,” says Sirius flatly. “We can find another plan.”

“God, please—”

“I’m not going back to Britain! You know what happened the last time I did?!”

“Yes,” snarls Remus, “because I can hear it in my head right now, Sirius!”

Sirius blinks at him. "That's your worst—"

"Yes. You leaving me again." Remus hesitates. "Yours?"

"The wedding."

"Ah."

Sirius hesitates. He raises a hand and it's shaking. He puts it on Remus' cheek. "I can't," he murmurs. "I just can't. Ask me anything else. Anything. And I'd do it. But I can't do this."

Remus swarms into his space. He kisses Sirius once and then again. Then, he grabs him and hugs him very tight, breathing in the smell of his hair, gripping onto the back of his jacket at his shoulderblades and pressing their chests and throats and beating hearts together. Sirius hugs him back slowly. He presses his face into Remus' neck.

"You can," Remus murmurs. "Be brave for us. Sirius. For us."

"I—" Sirius breathes in deeply. "I can take us to North London. Grimmauld."

"I love you," proclaims Remus.

Sirius pulls away from him, still trembling. "That's a part of the problem. The problem we—" He gestures between them. "We have."

"I know. You're doing it?"

Sirius nods once. "I have to face my maker, don't I?" he asks, soot-smudged face twisting. Remus doesn't know

whether he means his mother or James or even Voldemort himself. In a way, all of them have made him.

Remus kisses him once more. He holds their foreheads together, more intimacy in that than in any amount of words. "When the wards go down," he murmurs. "Any second. Okay?"

"Okay," whispers Sirius. "Fuck. I'm so fucking scared, you prick."

"I know."

"You'll stay with me?"

"Until the very end," Remus promises.

"Shit."

"Not even he could keep me away."

Sirius nods. He presses his face into Remus neck again and holds it there. He breathes evenly.

Remus watches the wards above. They're beautiful even as they come apart. He loves magic. He thinks he will love it for the rest of his life. And that's another part of the problem they have — he will love most things for all his life.

With a pop like suction in the eardrums, the wards collapse. Sirius grabs Remus tight and twists. They disapparate.

Chapter End Notes

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MADE WHOLE

Chapter Notes

eating bricks. wuthering heights by kate bush style
chapter

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It takes James half an hour to get lightheaded and another fifteen minutes for his legs to give out under him. He crashes to the ground and whacks his head off a stout stone wall running to his left on the way down. There, he lies in a heap, not moving, nose crushed against the concrete.

“Shit,” Dorcas says. She kneels down beside him and sticks a hand under him to turn him onto his back. “Are you still with me?”

James grunts his assent. “I’m tired.”

Dorcas props him up against the wall. She kneels at his side and peers intently at him. “We should head back.”

“We can’t. Not yet.”

“You can’t walk any further.”

Lungs aflame, James drags in a hollow breath. He reaches out and grapples around until he finds Dorcas’ wrist. He holds it tightly in his hand and begs that she not let go in everything but words.

She doesn’t move away. When James’ vision clears of black dots enough to see her, she looks worried.

“We shouldn’t have come,” she murmurs. “Oh, let me look at your head. Stay still.”

She starts prodding at a cut on James’ temple. James leans back against the wall in a heap like folded paper and counts his breaths. One. Two. Three. Each feels more out of place than the last. Above, the orange-red night sky burns like an angry bloodshot pupil, and despite the oppressive heat of the smoke, a cold wind is rushing down the street from the south, brisk and stinging.

“Don’t know why I let you do this,” mutters Dorcas. She sits cross-legged beside him and stops poking.

“The walking?” James asks.

“Everything. Everything you do.” She stops poking and leans over, over, like a toppling building, until her forehead is rested on his shoulder. She sits like that for a long time.

James puts an arm around her. Together, they feel very small. The great wrathful world around them, all the tall geometric shadows of hazy buildings and the sky, and on the horizon, through the gaps in buildings across the street, a line of distant, fierce light. Dorcas has her legs folded and her shins pressed against his hip. James doesn’t know whether she intends to strangle him or stay there, still and mourning.

“You know,” she says after a while. “We could go. Both of us together. Get out of here while we still can.”

It’s the last thing James expected to come out of her mouth. “Get out of London, you mean?”

“Yeah. Before the Order... I mean, they’re bound to find out eventually.”

“Mmm,” says James. “Well, I’m not going either way.”

That’s that. Dorcas nods against him. She’s a great deal less slight than James but she might as well be his injured, cramped-up mirror; if a stranger came upon them, they wouldn’t be able to tell which of them was injured and which of them was not. The scar at the corner of her lips is always pulled taut with a grimace now. James is sure one of these days it’ll rip open.

“We’re going back, then,” she says simply. “Come on.”

“Just give me a sec.” James forces himself to breathe again. Whatever part of his brain used to keep him taking in oxygen thoughtlessly has decayed along with everything else. He has to think about it now and it has become a constant nagging presence. He doesn’t think he’ll ever be able to breathe naturally again.

Dorcas breathes with him. In, out. In, out. In it, she seems to tell him that she won’t go anywhere. Not without him.

“Do you miss Lambeth?” she asks quietly.

“Every day,” agrees James simply. “Every single day.”

There is movement further up the street.

Dorcas freezes up. James tries to raise his tired head, bones alive with a deep, cold ache that makes even such a small motion burn like a brand. They crouch together in darkness, neither speaking.

It’s footsteps. Two pairs of footsteps. And voices, speaking. Quiet and hushed. Too far away to hear.

One of Dorcas' hands snaps out to snag a pebble off the ground. Not hesitating, she hurls it over her head into the smog. It flies through the air and hits the wall of an abandoned crystal shop across the street, too far into the smoke to see, clattering.

The footsteps stop dead.

Taking the distraction, Dorcas grabs James under the arms and hefts him up and over the wall to the other side, where she drops him. The pain is white-hot and blinding; James thinks for a moment he will surely pass out from it. She shoves him down to the ground behind cover and ducks beside him so they're both sitting low in the darkness.

It's just in time. There's a sharp crack on the street; magic, a swooping spell that pierces the night and sends a glow rushing in a mirage across the buildings to James' left. It explodes against something — the pavement, probably — with an angry hiss.

"I'm sure it was nothing," someone calls from the shadows, voice echoing. "Come on."

James tips his head back against the wall, fists clenching and unclenching in his lap. "You're crazy," he hisses at Dorcas. "Death eaters—"

She presses a hand over his mouth hard. "Shh," she breathes.

"I swear I heard—" one of the people on the street says.

"Come on. Let's just keep moving. It's only half an hour north of here, we can make it before dawn."

It hits James then that he knows that voice. And then, immediately following, that this must be a dream.

Because there's no way Remus is in London.

Dorcas' wide, dark eyes meet his in the gloom. She has recognised it too.

"You're okay," Remus' voice says again. "Seriously. I promise it was just something falling, a bit of roof or something. Or a fox. Death eaters wouldn't stop to hide in alleyways, trust me."

"Yeah, well," mutters the second voice. "I'm sort of paranoid right now, so forgive me for—"

James lurches from behind the wall quicker than he has ever moved. He topples over it and scrambles to his feet, staring into the damp red gloom. With the streetlamps all knocked out weeks ago, he can't see further than a few feet ahead. He opens his mouth to shout.

Dorcas tries to grab his wrist and tug him down. James staggers, one knee buckling, but holds his ground nonetheless, shaking her off.

Fuck it, he decides, and raises his voice to holler, "SIRIUS! REMUS!"

His voice echoes conspicuously down the street. There's a snatch of silence.

Remus' voice says, in the dark, "Sirius, it's a dementor. Sirius—"

"Sirius!" James calls again. He stumbles blindly into the smog, falling over a pothole in the road, whipping his head

around to find their shapes in the thickening smoke.
“Remus, where are you?!”

“I don’t know which memory this is,” Sirius calls. “James?! James!”

Dorcas finds James and snatches his arm. “It could be a trick,” she says shakily.

James dislodges her. He plunges back into the darkness, hands stretched out in front of him. He feels like a walking corpse and imagines the visual isn’t much less grim. There’s a flare of light as bright as a blaze in the darkness up ahead and he pelts towards it, heart in his mouth.

Then, in front of him, a figure swells out of the smoke. Pale and long. Dark hair long around its shoulders. It might as well be a ghost.

Crazed, James grabs its shoulders. Sirius stumbles away, flailing; fire lashes from his right hand and misses James’ side by an inch, and with the momentum, James stumbles with him, overbalancing, the world spinning. The red sky, reflected in the tarry pavement, lurches beneath him. He staggers and pitches forwards— and two strong, thin arms catch him.

“Fuck,” says Sirius’ voice in his ear. Together, they sway backwards, a wall swelling behind them; Sirius’ back hits it and they end up piled together against the brick. “Shit. Jamie?”

James almost cries right there. He bundles his arms around Sirius’ back, clutching and pulling; he feels knobbly spine under his hands, black nylon jacket, *warmth*. That magical smell Sirius carries with him everywhere. He wants to hold every inch of him in his hands and shield him from the

world and keep him from slipping away ever again, to trap him somewhere safe.

Sirius' arms hesitate under him for a moment and then drop around James' shoulders. One of his hands presses against the back of his head, feeling through the shorn hair. He grips the side of James' neck in his palm as if he's trying to feel his pulse and his breath and make sure he's still alive. His elbows press into the top of James' back and they feel almost like jagged wings — James would like to stay like this for the rest of his short life and rot here.

"Oh my god," Sirius murmurs into his ear. "Jamie. James."

James laughs breathlessly. "Tell me something only you would know," he croaks, only moving closer. He thinks even if Sirius couldn't do it, he wouldn't let go.

"Fuck. I dunno." Sirius puts his lips to the top of James' head and says into the skin, "Uh, your greatest fear was— uh, that stupid ghost demon thing. From the muggle movie. We saw it when we were twelve. You pushed me out of the way. Remember? In the dungeons, and we laughed at you about it for weeks."

"Oh Merlin. It's you."

"And you?"

James wracks his brain. "The last thing you told me, at the wedding," he chokes out. "You told me to trust you. You said 'trust me' and ran off. And before that you snapped my wand, you prick. I've been using a spare. Doesn't work right."

"Sorry," Sirius whispers. "If it helps, mine hasn't been either."

A hand lands on James' shoulder; James knows what it is instantly and doesn't have to look. He breathes in the smell of Sirius' throat and breathes out, and it hurts, it burns like holy fire.

"James," murmurs Remus at his side. "You're bleeding, let me look at you. What happened?"

"Hey," says Dorcas' voice sharply, approaching and accompanied by her sharp footfalls. "James—"

"It's them," James says quickly, turning to find her in the gloom. She stumbles into sight, staring. "I checked."

"Fuck," she says. She leans a hand against the wall, panting. "Don't fucking do that."

"James," says Remus again, even softer now. "Let me look at you? Please?"

James wants to push him away; he doesn't have the strength. Sirius' hands don't loosen on him but they shift a bit, as if offering an exit. But he doesn't want to leave, not yet.

"It's fine," he mumbles. "Honest."

"Just let me look?"

"I'm fine, Remus!"

Sirius scoffs and it sounds very forced. The sound vibrates through James' cheek. "Don't pass up the opportunity to be doted on."

James finally pulls away, feeling like he has to before someone pulls him off. Shaken, Sirius stares at him. His hair

is longer again since James saw it last, far past his elbows. It looks in need of a wash. He's a bag of bones and seems not to have slept in days. His clothes are all dark.

"You're okay," James murmurs, more confirmation than anything else.

Sirius nods. He hugs James again, rubbing his back in small circles. "I'm okay," he says with emphasis. "I promise you I'm okay."

He's the one to pull back this time, leaving James feeling like a building with the scaffolding taken off. He stumbles; Remus puts a hand on his back. He turns and they look at each other for an ugly moment.

"Hi, James," says Remus very sadly. "You look terrible. We thought you were— were—"

"Well, I'm alive," James replies, feeling stiff. "So you can fuck off again now. No. Fuck. Don't, please. Please don't go. God. That was hyperbole."

Sirius laughs again and he's the only one that does. The sound trails out of him and dies a moment later. James hears him shuffle his feet.

Remus is still staring at him intently. He raises a hand, inside the sleeve of his sweatshirt, and wipes gingerly at the gash across James' forehead. It's the most tender touch James has felt in months. He feels something inside him, probably an organ, crumple up.

"We're not going anywhere," Remus promises quietly. "Why are you here?"

“Why are *you* here?” It hits James like a truck. “You both—how long have you—”

“Not long,” Sirius says quickly. “We met in, uh, Hungary. By chance. On Moony’s job for the wolves.”

“Which was a bust, by the way,” Remus mutters.

“And he’s been staying in Reykjavik with me since, but it’s only been a month or so.”

“Reykjavik?” demands James. “That’s where you’ve been all this time?”

“It’s— sort of— it’s complicated,” Sirius replies lamely. He looks around as if hoping the floor will open and swallow him whole.

“Why are you here?” James asks again, trying to keep calm. “Tell me the truth.”

“To find you,” Sirius says, at the same time as Remus says, “To find the Order.”

They turn to look at each other. Remus raises an eyebrow.

“To find you and the Order,” Sirius corrects quickly. “The Sanctuary’s under attack, we need all the help we can get.”

James stares. “I thought you said you were in Reykjavik?! You’ve been with Lily?!”

“Only for a bit,” Remus blurts out. “We had to take Mary to the—”

Dorcas throws her hands over her mouth, a strangled gasp escaping her. She staggers and her shoulder hits the wall. She stares at Remus, eyes huge.

“Mary?” she asks, voice shaking. “What the fuck...? You’ve seen Mary? Mary’s alive?!”

“Shit,” says Remus faintly. “Uh... yes. Sort of. Not really. Kind of. It’s hard to explain.”

“How can that possibly be hard to explain?!” Dorcas demands, voice climbing about an octave and cracking on the last word.

James stands in the middle of it all feeling like a live wire. “The Sanctuary’s under attack?”

“Yí’ān almost died,” says Sirius, nodding fervently — he runs a hand back through his hair, looking very stressed. “Fuck— we need to move. Now.”

“Who’s Yí’ān?” Dorcas asks, bewildered.

“Doesn’t matter,” Remus says. “We can explain on the way — we need to run. We need to get to Order HQ. Sirius can apparate but he’s never been there before— we need to go on foot—”

“James can’t run,” says Dorcas.

Remus frowns. “What do you mean he can’t run?”

“Of course I can,” James cuts in roughly. “I’m fine. Let’s go, it’s fifteen minutes off if we sprint—”

Dorcas grabs his arm tight. “You can’t run,” she says sternly.

James glares at her. “You’re not my mother,” he snaps. “Come on.” And he takes off into the smoke.

“For fuck’s sake!” he hears her shout behind him.

Sirius, always the fastest, catches up with bounding paces. "What," he grunts, "what was she talking about?"

James feels the conspicuous puzzle-piece grinding of his cartilage chest, the rumble and click of it. He doesn't turn to look at Sirius. "She's fussing over nothing," he pants. "Come on, it's not... far..."

"You look terrible—" Sirius grabs his arm tight. "Jamie, slow down. Fuck."

"I'm fine," James assures. He rakes in a long breath and forces a grin across his face. "Sirius. Sirius, I— I—"

The world goes very fuzzy. James feels his steps lurch to a snail's pace as if everything has gone into slow motion, one after another, pounding, the force of them rattling his brain in his skull. The ground swings up to meet him— someone catches him. Everything darkens and then goes out.

"Motherfucker," Dorcas curses. "For such a small guy, he's heavy."

She's got James' limp body slung across her back, his arms over her shoulders and her hands beneath his thighs. She's stronger than Sirius and Remus combined but Remus can't help feeling guilty about it — she looks as sick and fatigued as James himself, who ran about ten steps and passed out in the road, about the most Jamesish thing he could have possibly done.

Sirius hovers behind her as if scared James will fall off. "So this was— this is all from Little Hangleton?" he asks for the second time.

“Yeah. Fuck.” Dorcas straightens up. “Something broke that they couldn’t fix. Come on.”

She starts off at a brisk pace down the road, not walking but not quite running either. Remus and Sirius jog to catch up to her.

“He shouldn’t be out here,” Remus says. “With the air— this is all from the fire?”

He watches Dorcas’ face change sharply. She schools her features a second later. “Yes,” she says simply. “It’s all the way around the east side of the city now. The death eaters have warded it from getting any farther. They’re trying to starve us out.”

“And the muggles?”

“Mostly evacuated.”

“Good to know the Order’s not dead,” Sirius says. “Since we thought for— for ages.”

“Mmm,” says Dorcas. She looks very uncomfortable now.

“Dorcas,” Remus starts.

She turns and gives him a piercing look. “You’ve just told me Mary’s still alive,” she snaps. “Can it wait?”

Remus ducks his head. “Sort of alive,” he agrees. “Sorry.”

Dorcas shuffles James a bit higher on her back. She nudges her cheek against the top of his hanging head, seeming to do it unconsciously. After a moment, rounding a corner, she asks, “How did she survive?”

“Rescued,” says Sirius. “From the attack you last saw her during. One of the foreign forces there to help was the same man who, uh— he took me in. After the wedding. He took her back to Reykjavik. I found her there.”

“And she’s okay?”

“No.”

Dorcas waves a hand impatiently. “Go on.”

Sirius swallows audibly. “Kettering,” he says simply.

“*Fuck.*” She stops in her tracks and swears again.

Remus puts a hand on her shoulder tentatively. “We’ve got her to a set of healers,” he says. “And one who thinks they have some sort of cure. There’s hope.”

Dorcas turns to look at him. She looks tortured. “She’s been in pain,” she says.

“For the most part, yes.”

“All this time.”

“Yes.”

Sirius coughs once. “We,” he says. “Uh. We sent a letter.”

“Of course you did,” Dorcas says faintly. “Of... of course.” Her hands flex around James’ legs. For a second, Remus thinks she’s going to drop him on the ground. But she doesn’t. She just stands there with the wind threading through her clothing, eyes very distant, watching something neither of them can see.

“Dorcas,” Remus murmurs. “We need to keep going.”

“Right.” She clears her throat and sets off with a sure, heavy stride, face very dark. “Remind me to murder James Potter when he wakes up.”

Sirius and Remus exchange looks. Neither of them answers her. This confirms it; something happened to the delivery service, and Dorcas probably knows what that was.

They walk in silence through the streets Sirius once called home. Remus watches him out of the corner of his eye, not commenting. He figures he doesn't need to say it for both of them to feel its presence. The heavy strange otherness. When Remus was last in London, it felt like a city. Now, it feels like a perdition, a sort of strange, red underworld, the clouds so low and thick you could reach out and touch them; they mask the tops of even three or four storey buildings up ahead, their mass impenetrable. If the muggles have satellites looking down on the city, they won't be able to see anything. Perhaps that's part of the death eaters' intention. Perhaps they don't care enough to think about stuff like that.

Dorcas says nothing else for the majority walk, only leads them silently north towards Hackney Terrace with James a deadweight across her back. Remus can hear the cogs in her brain turning from behind her, where he and Sirius walk side-by-side. The roads are empty but they all keep to the pavement anyway.

Sirius is the one to break the silence. “You're all still living here, then?”

“Those of us that're still alive, yeah,” Dorcas calls over her shoulder. “Less of us every day. We lost Moody.”

“Shit.” Sirius glances at Remus as if to say, *who's Moody again?*

Remus shakes his head subtly. "What happened to Direct Action?" he calls.

Dorcas looks back at him. "The Friends are all dead," she replies stonily. "Or abandoned the war effort. None of them left to run it."

"Oh. Gambit too?"

"Ran off to Europe."

Remus balls up his fists and presses his nails into his palms. He wants to ask more questions — he has about a million of them — but can't conjure any which Dorcas might answer clearly. She doesn't seem in the mood to talk, and no wonder.

Sirius leans over to murmur to Remus, "You're doing the talking when we get there, right?"

Remus elbows him. "I never agreed to that."

"This was your idea!"

"I—" Remus scowls heavily. "Fine."

Sirius squeezes his wrist once, seeming to understand that at the moment, Remus wouldn't even allow James to take his hand, which is saying a lot. He lets go and they press onwards into the red wastes.

Most of the shops are gutted, probably by those brave muggles who stayed behind. It feels like a horror movie in here, a snowglobe with blood instead of water, which is a funny image when Remus thinks about it. He still feels hysterical with the rush of the battle back in Rostock, but it's so quiet here compared to the Sanctuary that his ears

are ringing with it. Every sound echoes, nothing to muffle it; only the hard, sharp edges of empty buildings and of abandoned hope.

About ten minutes out from Hackney Terrace, James begins to stir on Dorcas' back. Remus watches his back flex; he raises his head a bit.

"What happened...?" he asks sleepily. "Dorc's?"

Sirius jogs to walk at Dorcas' side. "You're still an idiot, Jamie," he teases, voice strained. "Hey, look at me. You're alright."

James' shorn head bobs around to face Sirius. "Sirius," he mumbles. "You're here. I thought... thought..."

"You passed out," Sirius says. "Tried to run with your chest like that, honestly, it was sort of funny, you fell right on your arse."

James laughs a bit at that. Remus watches his shoulders jump. "Where are we going?"

"HQ," Dorcas says. "Stay still, you're hard enough to carry already."

"I can walk."

"No, you can't," Remus and Dorcas say at the same time.

James stares over his shoulder at Remus. He doesn't frown or even look particularly sad. He doesn't smile either. He just picks at Remus with his hard eyes. One of the lenses of his glasses is cracked. Remus can't hold the contact for long and has to look away.

“Huh,” James mumbles. He slides his arm along Dorcas’ shoulder and Sirius takes his hand. They press onwards.

The turning onto Hackney Terrace is like any other — empty, lifeless and still. The whole street is dark, no cars parked along its pavement. Remus can’t pick apart HQ from the crush of terraced houses, its windows blacked out and curtained like all the others. Dorcas finds it easily.

At the foot of the walkway to the door, she stops. “Can you stand?” she asks James.

James shuffles off her back, finding his feet. He palms at his chest and coughs a few times, but they’re unlike any cough Remus has ever heard. Snapping, creaking, rubber-band sounds. Gunshots blowing open locks. Seeming not to notice he’s doing it, he stumbles to Sirius and grabs him into a short, tight hug, patting the back of his head clumsily. Sirius holds him in turn. They sway there for a second before James seems to realise now isn’t the time and pulls away.

“Yeah,” he mutters. “I’m good.”

Dorcas ascends the narrow path to the door. She wraps on it a handful of times with her knuckles, in a pattern far more intricate than the code Remus knew when he was last here. James staggers to stand at her shoulder and Remus and Sirius hover behind them, half in the darkness.

Nobody answers the door for some time. Remus is sure nobody’s home and has the brief, terrifying feeling that maybe they’ve all gone and died and it’s only the four of them still in the city. Just as he’s halfway into a mild logical collapse, the door handle turns and there’s the click of the lock; the door swings open.

Frank Longbottom pokes his face out, peering at them all. "What are you doing out?" he demands. "Dorcas, you know we're not—"

"We've got visitors," Dorcas cuts in, gesturing over her shoulder to Sirius and Remus. "They're back in the country."

Sirius waves with his bad arm, which is still glowing a bit. Remus cracks a faint, tired smile.

Frank Longbottom watches them warily for a moment. "You've checked who they are?"

"They're real," James confirms. "Uh, as for me, the last thing you said to me was, uh, something about passing the kettle. Breakfast a few days ago."

Nodding slowly, Frank opens the door. "Quickly," he mutters. "There might be—"

"There aren't any death eaters in London tonight," Dorcas puts in, shuffling past him. "They're all in Rostock."

There are no lights on in the entrance hallway. Frank shuffles them towards the kitchen, James limping and the rest of them tripping over their own feet in the dark, over the partially folded rug in the middle of the floor and the half of a broken wand someone has left against the skirting board.

Dorcas gets to the door first, stepping into the kitchen. The rest of them follow. There's light inside, from a gas lamp and the fire, and a handful of figures sitting around the kitchen table. Remus squints — in the stark light, he thinks he can make out Professor McGonagall, two Order

members he knows but cannot name off the top of his head, and two strangers he has never met.

McGonagall stares between Sirius and Remus. Mostly at Sirius, though.

"Hi, professor," Sirius mumbles, taking a seat beside James. "Been a bit."

"Yes." She clears her throat. "Yes, it has been. You look in good health, Black."

Sirius does not, by any stretch of the imagination, look to be in good health. He looks like he's been dragged backwards through a hedge, and he also looks mildly irradiated.

"Thanks," he says awkwardly. "It's— well, I can't say it's good to be back."

"And why are you back?"

"Rostock needs help," Remus says, taking over — Sirius shoots him a grateful look. "We're under attack. Death eaters. And we're outnumbered. We need reinforcements, as many of them as you can get."

"We're already losing," Sirius agrees, nodding fervently. "Any help you can spare, anything helps. Please."

McGonagall stares between the both of them. After a pause, she reaches up to rub her face with both hands. She looks less well-kept than Remus has ever seen her.

"We haven't heard from the Sanctuary in months," she says eventually. "We assumed it had fallen."

“We assumed you had fallen too,” says Remus. “Us out in Europe, I mean. We thought the Order had burned.”

“We’re still very much here, Mr. Lupin.” McGonagall peers him. “Weren’t you sent on a job dealing with the pack in Wales?”

Remus squares his jaw. “It went a bit sideways, professor.”

She nods. “Yes,” she says. “I expect it did.”

Sirius glances between Remus and McGonagall. “We’re running out of time,” he says desperately. “Please.”

McGonagall turns her sharp gaze to him and he seems to wither. “Nobody has contacted us,” she says slowly. “In all this time. We’ve sent countless correspondences, Black, while you have cavorted heavens knows where, missing for *years*— and you need our help now?”

Sirius sinks low into his seat. “Professor—”

“It’s because none of our letters have been reaching you,” blurts out Remus. “And none of yours have been reaching us. Because nobody’s been sending them.”

The room goes dead quiet. Sirius turns to look at James and, opposite him, so does Dorcas. Remus too. He’s staring hard at the table with a wide, blank gaze, not making eye contact with any of them.

“I see,” says McGonagall dangerously softly. She, too, looks at James.

The silence is far too long. Nobody moves — James doesn’t look up. It’s a festering, skin-crawling thing. Remus gets the distinct feeling of being lined up before a firing squad.

McGonagall clears her throat. Instead of speaking to James, however, she nods to the aurors, who stand up as one. Remus recognises them now. Edgar Bones and Sturgis Podmore. Ex-Ministry. His skin crawls; he resists the urge to duck his head, lest they see his face and recognise the scars across it.

Bones and Podmore clunk out of the room. Nobody speaks, and James still doesn't look up. Sirius' hands twitch on the table, lights fluttering at the fingertips of his bad arm, which is one of the only light sources in the room. Dorcas shuffles her feet under the table, scowling. Remus thinks, *god, let me hold this all together. Let me keep us in one piece.*

Eventually, time running more viscous by the second, the aurors' footsteps clatter back down the stairs. They step back inside with their arms full of—

Dorcas launches out of her seat, standing up — she slams her hands on the tabletop. “No!” she says desperately. “That’s not—”

Podmore opens his black bag and pours out *hundreds* of unopened letters. They scatter across the floor, bursting from their tightly-knotted confines and covering the hardwood, many skittering beneath the table and hitting the walls. They form a huge pile at his feet. They each have two bags in total.

“There’s more up there,” says Bones needlessly, standing in the mess, which covers his boots. He drops both of his sacks against the wall and puts his hands on his hips, exhaling heavily. “They were stuffed into the wall.”

The horrible tension gets ten times thicker. James still hasn't glanced up. When Remus looks back at him, he's got

his eyes screwed shut and his brows pressed tight together with anguish. Resignation, too.

Silently, Dorcas sits back down.

“Well,” McGonagall says quietly. “I believe we’re done here. Longbottom, if you’ll gather all who are able to fight — I presume one of you is able to apparate?”

Sirius nods shakily. “I—”

“That’s it?” Dorcas cuts in. “That’s all you’re going to say?”

McGonagall turns her sharp gaze onto her. “Excuse me, Meadows?”

Dorcas’ hand twitches as if attempting a fist. “You can’t just say that,” she says, “that’s—”

“Dorcas,” James mumbles. “Don’t.”

“If you would like me to elaborate on my feelings, Miss Meadows,” says McGonagall severely, still very quiet, not raising her voice even a decibel, “I shall do it at a point in time when we are not in the midst of an assault. You are both to pack and vacate headquarters by the end of the week. If you wish, we shall find alternate lodgings for you. Do you understand?”

Dorcas stares. “You’re... you’re firing us?” she asks breathlessly.

“Did you want to have your hand caned, Meadows?” McGonagall asks. “Or a detention? We are adults, all of us. I had expected better of you than to behave like a child. I suppose that was misguided of me.”

“Professor—”

“Dorcas,” James says again. “Dorcas, please just leave it.” He’s pleading now.

“No,” Dorcas says, “you— you can’t just—”

“Can’t just what?” asks McGonagall.

Dorcas opens her mouth and then closes it again. She turns to look at James; there’s the distinct sound of her kicking him under the table. He looks up at her then. They stare at each other, a sort of quiet conversation.

“If it’s what you wanted to hear,” says Longbottom solemnly, standing up. “I’m immensely disappointed in you both. This is a war, not a game. You should have come to us. Letters in the wall, Jesus— did nobody check on them?”

“We were told,” says McGonagall icily, “that the death eaters were interfering.”

Dorcas winces. It’s her turn to look at the table. Both she and James have shrunk so far in on themselves that they appear half their normal size.

McGonagall stands up. Without another word, she tosses a handful of floo powder into the flames and proclaims, “The Hog’s Head!” before disappearing inside.

“This is what you get, I suppose,” says one of the strangers. “For putting your war on a kid’s shoulders.”

“Shut up, Aves,” mutters Dorcas.

James plonks his elbows on the table and puts his face in his hands. He sniffs wetly.

“Don’t start fucking crying,” says Dorcas waspishly.

“I’m not crying,” replies James’ muffled voice. “We—” He pulls his face out of his hands, blinking red eyes. “We were doing okay with it for a while— when Mary was still here, I mean—”

Dorcas seems to come alight. She reaches across the table and shoves James hard; he topples right out of his seat, both he and it clattering to the floor.

“You,” she shouts, standing, “you—”

Remus stands too, getting in her way to stop her stepping around the table to James. “Hey, Dorcas, wait, please—”

She glares at him hotly. “Out of my way, Lupin, I mean it—”

James clammers to his feet, coughing desperately. “I’m sorry,” he gasps. “I—”

“James,” Sirius says worriedly, half standing too. “Sit down, you’re—”

“She’s alive!” Dorcas shouts, so loud the windows seem to rattle. At least half of the room flinches. “This whole time, James, she’s been alive— and she sent us *letters*, she tried to tell us—”

James stares, eyes blown huge. “What?” he asks, voice breaking.

“Kettering,” Dorcas snaps. “She’s been— this whole time— and I didn’t know. All because you couldn’t open some fucking mail.”

“Dorcas,” James murmurs. “Dorcas I’m— I—”

"I don't want your apologies," she snaps. "Or your excuses. They're not worth anything, they don't mean anything—god, I could— I— I. I."

"Dorcas," Remus says. "Calm down. *Please*. This isn't helping anything."

"For months, he made me keep quiet about this! Promised he'd get on it, cried when I pushed the issue—"

Sirius shuffles to James' side. "Sit down, Jamie, come on, you look terrible..."

"Stop doting on him! My girlfriend is dying and I didn't even get to— get to—" The air goes out of Dorcas' sails and she slumps. "I didn't get to..."

"I didn't mean to," James croaks. "I didn't mean for any of this to get this far, I swear. I... I..."

"I don't care what you meant," Dorcas says darkly. "Or what you wanted. Just... just shut up, James."

"I've been— I've—"

"Being *sad* doesn't mean you get to let people die!" she shouts. "Being scared doesn't give you that right! We're all sad, we're all scared! Sirius looks like someone's killed his fucking puppy! And Christ knows what Remus has been through, and you're standing there like you're at a funeral, just— just stop!"

There's movement on the stairs. Remus looks over his shoulder — there's a handful of aurors and Order members clustered in the entryway, peering inside. Enough of them to make a dent, surely. Enough that a lot of them have probably heard a lot of this conversation too.

“Well,” says Aves at the table primly. “I wouldn’t say it’s all his fault. Wasn’t it the both of you that—”

Looking drained, Dorcas says, “Shut up, Aves! James, I can’t — I can’t even look at you. Go. Fuck off.”

James wrenches his arm out of Sirius’ grip. Staring at the ground with his head low, he barrels out of the room and through the aurors crowded outside. There’s the distant sound of the front door opening and then slamming shut.

“Oh, fuck,” says Sirius. He glances at Remus. “I’ll get him.” He runs after James.

Cool quiet falls. Dorcas collapses back into her chair, hands shaking, all of her shaking, as if she’s been electrocuted. Remus stands like a lamp or a house plant in the middle of the room with the pieces all around him, and the letters too. An incomprehensible amount of them.

“Shit,” he murmurs.

An Order member he doesn’t know pokes her head inside. “Did I just see the Chosen One run past?” she asks.

“Yes,” says Remus tiredly. “And he’s about to apparate us all out of here to fight. Once he’s... dealt with James.”

The fire lights up green again. From it pours a gaggle of older teenagers. Remus recognises most of them — they’re graduates of the last academic year. Some of them are old PA members. Morris and Beckman and a handful of others, mostly Gryffindors. They look worse for wear but not in the same shell-shocked, singed way most of the Londoners do.

Morris cheers when she sees Remus. “Alright mate?” she asks. “Blimey, you’ve gotten even taller.”

Remus smiles faintly. "You're coming to Rostock with us?"

"Of course. We managed to keep contact with the order."
Beckman wrings Remus' hand. "Where are the rest?
Meadowes, it's good to see you!"

Dorcas grunts, not looking up.

"We heard Black was here," says Morris curiously.

"Yeah," Remus tells her, "he's just taking a smoke break."

"Really?"

"Nah. But he is outside. Just give him a minute. He's
apparating us over to Germany."

"How'd he get around the Trace?!" someone demands.
"There've been tons of stories—"

Remus coughs uncomfortably. "Maybe he can explain it
another time," he says, knowing Sirius would be disquieted
even to be asked. "Look, here he is now—"

Sirius fights his way back inside, though the crowd around
the door, James' wrist in his hand. He doesn't let him go
even as he staggers inside, clutching so tightly it reddens
the skin there. "Hi," he says, seeing the dozens of eyes on
him. "Uh."

"Black!" says Morris. "We were sure you'd croaked it, come
here, you—" She gives him a short, one armed hug, and a
handful of others Sirius probably barely remembers echo
her. Sirius, stiff and uncomfortable, nods and forces a smile.

"We don't have much time," he says. Tentatively, as if sure
he'll run, he passes James' wrist to Remus, who takes it in

his hand. "I'm going to apparate the aurors over first. Be ready to fight. Patronuses, if you can cast them."

"What about the Trace?" someone asks.

"No point in trying to hide once you're there," replies Sirius. "They won't need to track you if you're fighting them anyway. Wands out."

Everyone complies. Sirius shoots Remus and James a tentative smile and disappears into the hallway. There's a pause and then a sharp crack as he sidealongs a group of fighters out.

"Stay and pack our stuff, then," Dorcas tells James stiffly. "I'm going."

"No," says James quietly. He shuffles his wrist up in Remus' hand and locks their fingers. "I'm staying with Remus and Sirius. What do we have to pack?"

"Fair enough," Dorcas says quietly. "That mirror."

James fishes in his pocket and pulls out— Remus recognises them instantly. The shards of Sirius' two-way mirror. They glimmer in the warm light.

"Still no luck fixing it," he says needlessly. "I'll get Sirius on that, I suppose."

There are another pair of cracks in the hallway, Sirius crashing in and out like a missile. Remus fishes in his pocket for his wand — he hasn't used it in months but still carries it, perhaps just to remind him of who and what he is so it can never slip his mind. James pulls his out too; of course, it's not really his. Neither lets go of the other's hand, which

leaves James wielding left-handed, but he doesn't seem to mind.

"You're sure there's nothing you want to get?" Remus murmurs. "You might not come back."

James nods once. "I just want to get out of here."

"You're explaining everything to us the moment we get a chance."

"Yeah. 'Course, Moony. Anything."

Remus squeezes his hand. "I'm glad you and Sirius are getting along."

"Have you two not been?"

"Not quite."

"Shit."

"We're figuring it out."

"What's up?"

"He's... it's..." Remus frowns. "He's been hiding in Reykjavik all this time, James. You were angry about that too."

James blinks at him. "I'm not angry anymore, though," he says. "He's back now. That's all that matters."

"He left."

"So did you."

That stings. "I had to."

“So did he,” James replies heatedly. His face falls somewhat. “And if I stay angry at both of you, I don’t have anyone. And I don’t— Remus, I don’t know if I can go on not having anyone. I might just die.” His voice cracks.

Dorcas glares at him from her place at the table. “You—” she starts.

Remus makes a face at her, trying to shut her up without words. She scowls at him but shuts her mouth, looking away. Both her knees are jumping. She’s still trembling — with anger or shock, Remus can’t tell.

Sirius staggers in, long hair a mess around his face. He looks a bit green. “Come on,” he says quickly. “As many people as you can, grab my arm.”

The graduates rush forwards to him, chattering with a merriment nobody else here seems to feel. The stranger, Aves, and a handful of Order members follow, reaching out to hold Sirius like a portkey. He shoots Remus a strained smile and disappears with all of them in tow into the ether, hand sparking, the limb still alive somehow. Whatever he did to rule it, Remus isn’t sure it’ll last, but it’s just what they need right now.

It’s only James, Dorcas and Remus left then. The whole place feels very quiet.

“There’s probably a handful of the injured still upstairs,” Dorcas mutters, sensing the sudden feeling of dereliction.

“They’ll have to leave soon, won’t they?” Remus asks. “Someone’ll have to get them out.”

“Sirius, probably. They’ll find us one of these days.”

"Fired," James murmurs, as if he still can't believe it.
"Fired."

Dorcas opens her mouth, face harsh. Then she seems to stop herself. Her expression morphs and she looks very sad.

"She's in Rostock still, then?" she asks.

"Lily got her a bed in their Kettering ward," Remus replies.
"Top floor."

"Right."

"You should go to her."

Dorcas nods slowly. Lip wobbling, she admits in a very tenuous voice, "I missed her."

"She can't move," Remus says quietly. "Just so you know before you see her." *Presuming Rostock isn't ash by now.*

Dorcas' lips pull at the corners, her lip folding. She presses her palms against her eyes hard, shoulders shaking.

"Dorcas..." James murmurs.

"Don't," she snaps.

There's a sharp crack. Sirius lurches around in the middle of the room, stumbling like he's dizzy, which he has the right to be with all of that apparition.

Remus and James catch him. For a handful of stolen seconds, the three of them press together and exist in the same space, arms around each other. James lets go of Remus' hand to sling his around Remus' back and grips Sirius' shoulder with it. Remus wraps them both close and

thanks the lord he's got long limbs. It's the best and most pure thing he has felt in months; Sirius' face close to his chest, James under his chin. One or all of them is sniffing.

"I love you both," says James in a choked voice. "Fuck, I've waited so long so say that. You're both great. I'm glad we're here."

"Glad I didn't off myself in '76," Sirius agrees.

"That's light," mutters Remus.

"I almost did! Story for another time." A strained laugh.

James laughs too, high and crazed. "Me too, Pads, now that you mention it."

"You're both going to be the death of me," Remus says. He takes Sirius' head in his hands and kisses his temple, and kisses James' too. "Come on."

Dorcas stands up, chair screeching. She's scowling still, but all the same she pulls James from their fray and hugs him once, nails digging into his back. James coughs into her shoulder harshly. She hugs him only harder. He grips her back.

"This isn't over," she warns quietly.

"I know," James mumbles. "I've got a lot to make up for."

"You do," Dorcas agrees. She pulls away. "There's nothing left for us here. Come on."

Sirius sticks his arm out. James takes the hand and Remus the wrist, and Dorcas the elbow. Remus looks around at HQ

one last time, the mouldy walls and dying fireplace — then, he's gone.

Sirius swells so full of nausea on landing that he comes to his knees and retches. He hasn't gotten any better at rapid-fire apparition since early this year, evidently.

James kneels down beside him, holding his hair back awkwardly. "God, you've got a lot of hair," he mutters. "Did you not cut it?"

"Not once," Sirius wheezes.

Ahead, there are pounding footsteps on the grass. Dorcas is sprinting towards the Sanctuary up ahead, which— Sirius peers up through watering eyes— somehow, it's still in one piece, though the fighting has come to its base and surrounded it there, flashes of spellfire setting the foundations alight like a creeping blaze.

Remus hauls him up under the arm. "You're okay?"

"Fine." Sirius shudders. He can hear already, in the back of his mind and growing louder. Dumbledore's voice, saying with frigid calm, *ready to give up? There's no shame in giving up, you know. We could have a long talk about it, if you'd like.* And beneath that, Tom, cooing, *but they're not your friends. They don't understand you. Not like I do.*

James grabs him, fingernails digging into his arm.

"Padfoot," he says. "Pads. Sirius. Stay with me. It's not real."

Trying to shake himself, Sirius peers up at the sky. It's thick with dementors, hovering low like a dark blanket. Patroni

lunge between them, but there aren't enough of them up there.

"Shit," James says. "I've only ever cast one of these right once. Here goes, I guess— *expecto patronum!*"

Nothing happens.

"Fuck," he mutters.

Sirius stretches his hand out in front of him. "Expecto patronum," he stammers. "Expecto... expecto..."

Already, the world is getting fuzzy. There's a fearsome wind burning across the hillside now and it hurts his face, burning where it touches skin. Sirius feels his knees go weak and his vision begins to pop at the corners, crackling into blackness.

He falls to the ground. James sits beside him, shaking him. At his other side, Remus puts a hand in the middle of his back. When Sirius squints up at him, he's staring at the sky above with this indescribable resignation on his face that Sirius has never seen there before.

James leans down to his ear. "Sirius," he murmurs. "Sirius, you have to think of something happy. Please. Something happy. Come on. You can do it. I swear."

"Something happy," Sirius murmurs.

"Yeah. A happy memory."

Sirius can't think of anything. He tries, pressing through his addled mind for some glimmer of hope in there, but all he can hear is Tom's laughter, and *I see it in you, now, too—*

you're changing, too. That echoing, hollow voice. The blunt, hinge-sharp pain of two broken legs.

James holds him tightly. "Come on," he murmurs. "We're all still here. It's the three of us together. Isn't that all we need? We'll work everything out and end all the fighting. And we'll go to Wales if Remus wants us to. Wales, won't that be nice? I stayed there for a while. At the start of the war. It's beautiful out there. You would like it. We can go there together." He holds his prickly shaved temple to the back of Sirius' neck. "Sirius, please."

Sirius thinks of Wales, picturing the bright blue sea in his head, and Remus at the counter making bread, kneading it in his long-fingered hands. Nights spent running in the fields with James. The shining ocean and the rippling green fields. He has never called a place home, not truly. He thinks someday he might like to. If it's with Remus and James, anyway. Nothing has ever been more home than—there it is, the memory—the three of them together in James' four-poster, pressed together to read the listings for the next Quidditch World Cup in the prophet at stupid o' clock in the morning, dawn light filtering through the curtains. James laughing. Remus laughing too. Warmth that didn't go away.

Sirius holds the picture of it in his mind. He raises his hand. "Expecto patronum!"

A slick, silvery shape bursts from his fingertips, huge and bright. It lopes in a circle around the three of them, sending light cascading across the ground.

James laughs delightedly. "Look!" he says. "Pads, look! Remus!"

Sirius stares at the patronus, which comes to a stop in front of them all, blinking. He had thought it was the grimm, death chasing him even into his best memories. But it's bigger and less hairy than the black dog of his name, and it has a slightly mangled snout, scarred and elongated.

It snuffles at Sirius' face a bit before darting into the sky, up towards the dementors.

"A wolf," Remus murmurs. "The wolf."

"Expecto patronum," James says, with more strength now. His own wolf bursts free from his wand and soars upwards to join Sirius'. "Remus. Remus, a happy memory. Moony."

Remus' eyes are bright; he blinks furiously. "The wolf," he says again.

"Patroni are protectors," Sirius says, finally getting his breath back. "Remus. A memory."

Remus closes his eyes. He leans on James until it looks like he might topple into the grass. In almost a trance, he says. "Expecto patronum."

His wolf joins James and Sirius'. The three cavort through the sky together, bashing the dementors apart, sending them cascading back into the clouds far above. They tussle and yap in the mist, carefree and bright.

Remus is the first to gather his wits. He hauls himself to his feet. "Come on," he says, "the fighting, quickly!"

Sirius pulls James up and together, the three of them sprint towards the shape of the Sanctuary across the grass, staggering over each other. The ground rumbles every few seconds with explosions from around the back of the

building, and at the front it is a mess of duelling; Sirius sees Order members and aurors alike clashing with death eaters, congealed around the front doors, which are closed. McGonagall, hair flying, duels three at once — twenty feet from her, Sirius spies both Longbottoms fighting back to back, wands a blur in front of their bloody faces.

A huge figure barrels out of the smoke towards them. James raises his wand and Sirius smacks it down.

“Claude!” he calls. “Claude, where’s—”

“Inside,” Claude says, skidding to a halt before them. “We’ve got all the injured inside and the doors barricaded. It’s just a matter of forcing them back. These are your—?”

“Mine,” Sirius agrees. “They’re mine.”

“You have bad taste,” they remark, not looking over their shoulder as they stun a death eater trying to creep up behind them. “They look like drowned rats.”

“Well, this one’s nice,” James mutters.

“This one duelled Voldemort with a knife and lived,” Remus murmurs. “I think we should be careful what we say.”

Claude laughs heartily, a booming sound. They grab Sirius and crunch him into a tight hug. Sirius feels their voice rumble in their chest as they say, *“Je suis si fière de toi.”*

“It’s only the start,” Sirius promises. “I’ve got a lot of time to make up for.” He squeezes James’ hand and pulls away from Claude. “Come on, we have to—”

There’s a sonic-boom sound, loud enough that it makes both of his ears start ringing. Sirius flinches hard and raises his

wand arm. Claude lurches around and says one word: "Shit."

An explosion has decimated a wall at the Sanctuary's left side, gouging into it like a wound. What remains of the walls there is scorched and smoking. All the lights inside the building flicker out at once and there's a low, dangerous groaning sound like sliding concrete.

"Lily's in there!" Remus shouts. "Shit, come on!"

"Get as many people out as you can, both of you," Claude commands. "Sirius, you are the powerhouse, come with me."

"But—"

"Go!" James urges. "Fight!" And he pelts off after Remus towards the Sanctuary doors.

"You still have my knife?" Claude asks.

Sirius pulls it out of his jacket. "Yes, but—"

"Good. Don't think." They rest a hand on his shoulder. "Just hunt."

Sirius draws a deep breath. "Just hunt," he repeats. "Good luck."

"Good luck," Claude agrees, and raises both fists to pummel atop the head of a passing death eater, sending them to the ground with an ugly crunch.

Clenching his fist very tightly around the long knife, Sirius raises it and spies a death eater ten feet away, fumbling with their mask as smoke descends around them from a

nearby explosion. He rushes them; the death eater staggers backwards, raising their head, and Sirius rears around to plunge an elbow up into their mask, lodging it the wrong way to blind them. He flips his knife in the other and takes a swipe at their side— they dodge, firing a stunner that misses Sirius' shoulder by an inch as he swerves to the side to avoid it, still driving them backwards. The death eater staggers over their feet, blind, and topples to the ground. Sirius reels back and kicks them in the side of the head, plucking their wand from their hand.

"Stay down," he advises, snapping it.

"That's Black!" someone shouts a few metres away. Some sort of European accent. "Black!"

Sirius whirls around and spreads his palm in front of him, unleashing from the upturned wrist a lash of white fire that unfurls towards the approaching death eater, hissing and smoking — the death eater dispells it with a wave of her wand. She plunges across the grass towards Sirius, maskless. He doesn't recognise her as one of his relatives but she could pass for one, hair in mad curls, face sharp and thin.

"You!" she snarls.

"Me," Sirius agrees, lashing out again. She parries it and they wind in circles around each other, Sirius with his hands raised, knife in one, magic in the other. "Do we know each other?"

She bares her teeth. "We met at my wedding," she growls. "*Avada kedavra!*"

Sirius launches out of the way, hitting the ground and rolling. He jumps to his feet and channels his power into the

landing; the earth splits open before him in a narrow ravine that worms towards the Rosier bride, but she dances out of the way, firing off a stinging hex that Sirius deflects.

“Not the best first impression then!” Sirius shouts.
“Stupefy!”

She shields easily, with snappy movements like she’s fencing. “And what has followed hasn’t been much better!”

“My apologies.” Sirius dives out of the way of a *bombarda* which lurches over his shoulder and into the night.
“Where’s Bella, then? I haven’t seen her yet but I’m sure she’s here somewhere.”

The woman bares her teeth at him. “Doing far more important work for the Dark Lord than this.”

“Is that jealousy I detect?” Sirius casts a lash of flame across the grass and it rises high against the night, swimming towards her in a mirage. “Your husband is probably cheating, by the way. He’s a right bastard.”

The Rosier bride casts the fire into ashy dust, which she hurls in a cloud like locusts back at Sirius. “*I am cheating on my husband,*” she replies shortly. “*Crucio!*”

Blinded by the soot, Sirius doesn’t dodge in time; the curse catches him in the hip and he lurches to the ground and lands in the dirt, thrashing and convulsing with his mouth full of spit and blood. The world whites out. The pain is awful and, more than that, it’s an anchor; Sirius knows the cruciatus curse like he knows the back of his hand. He’s felt it enough in his life that descending into its maddening heat feels like sinking into the bed of a childhood room. Even as he screeches his lungs out, he is coming home.

He rolls onto his back and, in the sky, sees the blurry form of a patronus. Whether it's one of theirs, he doesn't know. He raises his hand and throws a stunner from it like a baseball but evidently it misses. The curse doesn't end. Sirius tilts his head back and screams louder, torn apart cell from cell. He hears Tom laugh, louder and louder, and—

“SIRIUS!” someone shouts nearby. There's a sharp sound of impact and the curse ends.

Sirius slumps to the ground, still, muscles twitching all over his body. Above, he watches the patronus dance — he can see now that it's a swimming koi, bright against the night sky.

James swims into his field of vision, hands all over him. “Shit. You bit your tongue.”

Gargling blood, Sirius rolls over and curls up on his side, hugging his stuttering ribs. “F-Fuck,” he chokes. “Packed a punch, she did. I'm okay. Just give me a minute.”

James grabs his shoulder. “We might not have a minute.”

Sirius looks up at him. James has a bit of blood on his face — new, it's fresh and wet — and he looks grim.

“We need to run,” he says. “The Sanctuary's lost.”

Wordlessly, Sirius holds out a hand. James pulls him to his feet and puts an arm under his shoulders, holding him up as he twitches and jerks like a fucked up car engine.

Ahead, the Sanctuary has sunken at its foundations, dust in a thick cloud around it where it has begun to split apart; the entrance has halved along the top, half of the doorway fallen in and full of rubble. Someone has blasted a hole in

the side and is leading people out, walking and staggering and carrying stretchers and suitcases, backlit by fire licking through the forest behind the compound. Families and those without any. The injured and sick. They scatter across the grass, staring around, lost.

Most of the death eaters have retreated — Sirius sees a handful apparate away before his eyes, most of them in Claude's warpath. They got what they wanted. They have won.

The Rosier bride is crumpled on the ground with a dent in the back of her head and a rock lying beside her.

"You bashed her head in with a—"

"I know," James says quickly, "listen, I didn't know what else to do."

Sirius stares at him like he's gone mad. "You have a fucking baseball bat on your back, Jamie."

"Oh." James pauses for a second and then says, "I didn't think of that." He turns to grin at Sirius, a remarkably bright sight for the situation. "I remembered your letters. The ones I wrote for you. I take them everywhere with me. That's something, right?"

Sirius' heart hurts. He still hasn't read Remus'. "Yeah," he murmurs. "Yeah." He presses his lips hard to the side of James' face, next to his eye, a senseless thing. "Stay close to me."

They stagger together towards the blaze. Like a shadow, Remus materialises beside them, slipping under Sirius' other arm.

"You're hurt," he says.

"It'll go away on its own," Sirius replies sturdily.

"Cruciatus," James fills in.

"Shit, Sirius."

"It wasn't for very long!" Sirius says. "She cheated on her husband, you know. Good for her."

"Who?" Remus asks.

"He's lost his head," James tells him past Sirius. He breaks into a coughing fit and has to pull away, retching and twitching. Remus shoulders Sirius' weight and they both stare as James stumbles, hacking, pounding a fist against his sternum with those horrible cracking coughs coming out of him, barely human.

There are running footsteps; someone is sprinting towards them from the collapsing Sanctuary. Lily skids to a stop in front of them, staring Remus and Sirius up and down, wide-eyed.

"James?!" she asks desperately.

Sirius nods to him. "Help him?"

Lily turns and runs to his side. She puts a hand on James' shoulder and he turns and stares at her, wide-eyed, a cough dying in his throat and then coming alight again a moment later. She rubs his back as he bends double and hacks up a lung, murmuring too quietly for Sirius to hear.

"You're sure they aren't dating?" Sirius jokes.

"Oh, quiet," Remus laughs, though he sounds very strained.
"His chest..."

"We can deal with it later."

"We might not have a later."

"Of course we've got a later," Sirius says. "I've got a crazy fucking magical hand. We're together. We can do anything."

Remus hums disbelievingly. "We've got a lot of shit to get through first."

"You and James' disunion? You know he'll probably get me in the divorce."

It's the first time they've joked together in... years. Sirius isn't sure how to do it right. But Remus squeezes him very tight and pushes a smile across his scarred lips and says, "Disunion isn't it. A temporary marital disagreement. We still have custody."

"Of course you do," Sirius agrees. "Shit, Remus."

"I know." Remus inhales shakily. "I know."

Lily leads James back over to them slowly. He's still rasping rather than talking as he tells her, "I know. Listen, I know. It's okay. I'm trying not to be angry about it."

"Still." Lily hugs him around the neck with obvious tenderness. "I'm sorry anyway."

"We probably don't have time for the commiseration," James says, voice squeaking a bit like unoiled cogs. "Moons, don't look at me like that."

“The moment there’s a healer free,” Remus warns. “We’re getting you looked at and hospitalised if we have to.”

“Well, right now there’d better be a healer putting my best friend’s brain back together,” Sirius replies. “They can deal with Prongs later.”

“Who?” James asks, confused.

“Prongs is you.”

“You ass. Your friend, I mean.”

Sirius sticks an arm out and James comes under it. He can feel against his side the convulsions, the constant tension that comes with restraining a coughing fit.

“We’ll explain later,” he says. “Evans, is someone taking care of him—”

“Yes,” Lily cuts in. “Fuck, call me Lily, please. Come on.”

She takes James’ other side and, locked together, the four of them stumble towards the blaze and the soon-to-be wreck. It’s becoming difficult to tell who is holding up who. Sirius can still feel each of his ribs rattle with the dregs of the cruciatus curse and it wakes his brain up. His thoughts are going a mile a minute and he can make sense of none of them. The only things that are real in the world are James and Remus at his sides and the smoke in his mouth.

They reach the crowd clustered at the exit. Sirius searches for Yí’ān in the crowd and spies him towards the centre, being worked on by two healers with their wands out. He’s passed out cold but they would have tossed his corpse out of the way to make space for more of the injured if he was dead. All the air goes out of Sirius with the pure relief of it.

Lily leads them past him to a stretcher at the west edge. Mary is sunken into the folds of it with her eyes closed and her face tight with pain and at her side, holding her hand, is Dorcas, who peers up at them as they approach, face teary.

“They said nobody has made more of that cure yet,” she says. “We need to— I need to—” She trails off. “I... we need healers. Healers and more beds. Something. Anything. A lab. Where are we going to go?!”

Lily sinks to her knees at Dorcas’ side. She stares up at the Sanctuary and Sirius watches in real time her eyes take on some strange quality he has never seen in a person before. He can’t describe it. An ocular, focused rage. Determined, but it’s the sort of determined a wolf gets before biting someone.

“Okay,” she says. “I have a plan.”

“I like plans,” James wheezes helpfully.

“This one’s great,” Lily assures. “Real fun stuff. Sirius, can you walk?”

“Probably,” Sirius agrees. He could run if asked, he thinks. But walking is another matter entirely.

“I’ll take that as a yes. Can you apparate?”

Sirius eyes her. “What are you thinking?”

Lily clambers to her feet. “I am not letting anybody die here,” she says, enunciating each syllable.

“She’s not letting anybody die here,” says Remus, slightly airily. “Alright then. It’s that simple, I suppose.”

“Anything for you,” James assents.

“I’m with these two, whatever they do,” Sirius puts in. He puts his arms around their necks and squeezes. He thinks no matter what, somehow, they will be okay.

“I thought you’d say that,” Lily sighs, and then she grins. “Let’s get to work.”

Chapter End Notes

- [Official Tumblr](#)
- [Twitter Quotes Bot](#) (admin: [lupinlesbian](#))
- [Pinterest Board](#) (admin: [plantfeline](#))
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A HALVING

Chapter Notes

OKAY OKAY OKAY most of my notes are garbage but please read these ones thank u

this chapter marks the beginning of a relatively short hiatus! im going to take a few days off writing completely to get my head in check and then work on some work stuff for a while, and i'm also going to be finishing my deaged!sirius au 'the scream in the title', my first war canon divergence sci-fi horror wolfstar thing 'ectogenesis', and working on a few oneshots. i should be back in a few weeks - i hope this break offers the opportunity to catch up, to anybody who might have fallen behind on updates, and to reflect and digest for anybody who has kept up with my hectic release schedule!

some other notes!

- the [podfic](#) is still updating regularly and is incredibly high-quality - go check it out if you haven't already!
- my wonderful friend mad plantfeline has put together a survey for jpds readers to see what everyone's thinking about the plot and characters now - it's not particularly formalised and is just for fun, go fill it out [here](#)!
- seriously, if you haven't already, go check out my other main wip [ectogenesis](#) - if you like jpds you'll love it!

alright, i think that does it! i'll see you all in a bit. mwah. love you

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

On the snowy horizon, through the gathering blizzard that has dulled the skyline into pale grey and blue like a watercolour painting, sits the dark mound of Bardejov. It's only come into view in the past mile or so. The bitter cold has made Marlene's face numb and tingly and the high, whistling wind around her is deafening, a small roar that never ends.

At her side, Regulus has begun to fall over his own feet with exhaustion. The sloshing tanks of petrol each of them holds have frozen across the top, the sound of their cracking, sharp fragments loud in the desolate quiet, in which only the storm and their footsteps exist.

Marlene comes to a stop at the top of the hill they're climbing, staring off towards the city. "There it is," she proclaims. They can barely see its features from here, only it's tall, faint outline.

Regulus staggers to a stop beside her. "How much longer?" he asks, muffled.

"A few more miles."

"Can we stop for a bit?"

Marlene shoots him a look. The lower half of her face is covered by a balaclava so she figures if she scowls he won't be able to see it. She aims a kick at him and he dodges it and kicks her right back.

"No," she says. "Come on, pick your feet up."

They've been hiking through the frozen wastes to Bardejov city for days now. By all rights, he should be grateful they've

made it. Marlene has a list of properties and a lighter, and enough fuel to keep them both warm as the fire blazes. Regulus has a gammy ankle he twisted the other day and a fucking attitude.

Mid-December has made the far reaches of Slovakia frigid with cold. It'll be hard to light up in this, but Marlene thinks if anybody can do it, it's her. She and Regulus plunge onwards down the hill, through the gathered snow, which has begun to go icy along the top. Small, red lights blink along the mountaintops to their west from the tops of the dark leggy frames of radio towers, peering down at them through the writhing gloom, catching on falling particles of ice and sleet and setting them alight in snowglobe circles.

"God," Regulus mutters. "Definitely the maddest one we've done yet."

"How bad can it be? It's not Rostock."

He glances across at her. They heard the other day from a witch a few miles out of Poprad that the Sanctuary has fallen; nothing remains of it anymore. Regulus proposed at the time that they should head northwest to Germany soon. Marlene will have none of it; there's more than enough work to do out here.

Be careful in the cities, the woman warned them as they left her under the bridge she cowered beneath, a curse scar still fresh on her cheek. *Coming here was a mistake.*

Marlene ignored it. She's made a lot of mistakes in her life and none of them have killed her yet.

"I suppose it's not," Regulus agrees with tension. He stumbles to a halt in the snow, bending over. "One sec. Shoelace. Marlene, stop. *Marlene.*"

Marlene keeps walking. She feels a bit drunk with the cold and the fear and elation; if she stops she thinks she might keel over. She truges down to the ditch at the bottom of the decline and crunches across the frozen river running through it, sending spiderweb cracks all across its crystalline surface. There's a bit of snow caught on one of her eyelashes and it casts a white shadow across the upper left side of her vision. She feels blind and demented.

Regulus sprints to catch up with her. He reaches out to grab her by the arm and misses, almost tumbling to the ground. "If you leave me behind, you don't have anybody to help you," he snaps. "Just give me one second. One. Just—stop."

Marlene whips around to face him, walking backwards across the hard, dark earth, pearly and veined as black marble where the snow has been wrent apart. "It's not my fault you can't keep up."

"It's been days!"

"And I'm still on my feet!"

Marlene's heel catches on a log and she topples backwards into the snow, which folds around her like a cold trap. She claws her way out of it to her knees, spitting out a mouthful of ice.

Across the wastes, Regulus bursts out laughing, an awkward, keening sound. Marlene isn't sure when the last time she heard him laugh was. It's been a long time. "Ha!" he shouts. "On your feet. That was amazing."

"Ha," Marlene mocks. She clambers up and steps back over the log, marching towards Regulus. She's going to wring him around the throat until he can't make any noise with it.

Still chortling, Regulus pulls his knife out and meets her in the middle.

Dorcas,

It's Christmas soon! Hallelujah. I never liked Christmas. I think Mary wanted to like it, and you would've liked anything she did, but I always thought it was a waste of everyone's time and money. I stayed enthusiastic when you were around, though. Remember in second year when we all stayed at Hogwarts for the break? Lily sat in the library all day every day trying to find a hex to use on Potter that couldn't be traced back to her, because only Lily Evans would do research when she was upset, and the three of us commandeered the common room together and I forgot to get the presents I'd wanted to get so I snuck out to Hogsmeade on Christmas Eve for them. You seemed to like them, at least. That was good enough for me.

I think a lot about the last time I saw Mary. I don't know why it's been in my head so much lately. I told her she would be okay and I don't think I was lying. I think I told her I loved her but I can't remember for sure. Either way, I don't think that would be a lie either. And I can't... make sense of it. Because if I wasn't lying — and I don't think I was — I was telling the truth. But I don't think I was telling the truth either.

I think it's this: I want you to miss me so desperately it hurts. I want you to sit wherever you're sitting and think of me more than you don't think of me. I'm not certain I have the capacity to do that for you, but the reverse makes all this feel meaningful. Like I have something to come home to.

They settle for the night in an abandoned bomb shelter on the edge of the city. To the east stretch the rich muggle houses, five or six miles of them, and below in the deep-dug gulf sits the rest of the civilisation, piled atop each other, flat grey rooftops almost buried by snow. Marlene lights a small fire and holds her blue fingers towards it to bring feeling back into them, scorching her palms a little. Regulus curls up on the other side of the blaze beneath his pack and snores, conspicuously fake. She isn't sure when the last time he truly slept was, but it's been a long time.

The following morning, before the sun has risen fully, they peel out of their lodgings together and start up the incline of the frosted valley to the west, beyond which lies their prize.

"And you swear we're only scoping it out today," Regulus confirms warily. "Nothing more, nothing less."

"That's what I said."

"Well you've lied to me before. Forgive me for being cautious."

Marlene hikes her back up a bit on her shoulders. "We didn't even bring the kerosene," she reminds him. "You're getting sloppy. Oh, watch out."

Regulus staggers, peering down. "Ah, fuck off."

"Made you look."

He jogs a few paces to catch up with her, face upturned towards the pale morning. It's still snowing but the wind has calmed somewhat into a steady, curtained fall, flakes piling atop that which melted a bit in the night. The ground is softer. There is industry near here — an oilfield and a

smelting plant — and it has made the earth warm, too warm to ever freeze for long.

“You’re sure this is the right place,” Regulus says, for what must be the half-dozenth time.

“Oh, fucking hell. Yes. I wouldn’t take us out here if I didn’t know.”

“Yes you would.”

“My time is valuable. I have none of it to waste.”

Frowning, Regulus elbows her in the gut. “You can’t lie to me,” he says. “I know you too well for that.”

Marlene trips him up; expertly, he dodges it. “You don’t know anything about me,” she replies smartly. “Heads up, branch incoming.”

Regulus ducks beneath nothing and then curses, fooled twice. Marlene thinks it’s hilarious.

They make it up one side of the valley and pause there for a while, looking down across the grey sloping expanse of the city below. From up here, Marlene can see grey snow-capped mountains on the horizon, their huge bodies laid face-down in the earth. They form hips and knees if she looks hard enough.

Regulus pants beside her at the peak, hands on his knees. Eventually, he straightens up. “Are we going?” he asks impatiently.

“Eager,” Marlene remarks.

“Just conditioned.”

“Right.” She starts down the decline on the other side, which leads down through a dark, dense patch of foliage to a long dirt road at the bottom of the crater of land, fifty feet under them. Scud clouds stretch far out beyond them. If she didn’t know better she would think it’s close to raining.

Regulus clammers down behind her. They make it to the road and begin up it; it reminds Marlene of the night they first met, on the road away from the burning manor in France. She wonders whether Regulus could have foreseen where he would eventually end up. On the run with her and, on top of that, running directionless.

“Fuck,” Regulus says at her side. “I’ve got something stuck in my shoe.”

“Wow. Shit luck.”

“If you don’t stop, I— I’ll.” Regulus stops himself. He grabs her around the elbow and digs his fingernails into the skin there. “Just give me a second.”

Marlene obeys for once. She isn’t sure why. It’s a mercy she rarely offers Regulus — to stop, to breathe. She’s been paranoid lately that if she lets him stop and rest too often, he’ll realise he’s tired of walking and he’ll never start again. He’ll just sit in the road and die instead.

Regulus pulls off his boot and fishes the stone out. He tosses it up at her and Marlene catches it in her palm, peering at it. It’s not a stone at all; it’s a sharp fragment of bottle cap, ripped in half, with some Soviet *pivo* brand plastered across the metal in red and white; she can’t read it all and even if she could, doesn’t understand it.

Regulus stands up. Marlene hands it back to him. “Souvenir,” she says. He takes it from her palm.

They begin again, the sun cresting high behind a thick blanket of pale grey clouds overhead. Mist rises from the earth in the hills ahead of them, unfurling up the slopes and sitting low against what remains of the snow. Not quite condensation. Ghostly and wrong.

When they reach the forest through which sits the Svoboda estate, at its dark heart, Marlene pulls them off the road and towards the treeline. There is no path. Only the blackness inside and the threat of wolves or bears.

Regulus follows without complaint. He would have made a good death eater, Marlene thinks often, but doesn't like how that particular imagining makes her feel about herself, so doesn't let it go very far.

He's the first to break the silence. "Tell me about these ones, then?"

"Svobodas. Old family, old money. Purebloods, of course. And lobbyists of Voldemort from the very start."

"I don't recognize the surname."

"I think they've had enough shit going on over here that they didn't get involved in the pureblood social sphere in Britain much," Marlene says. "From what I got out of the guy in Nitra, anyway."

"Ah."

"Been a struggle between this lot and the more, uh, liberal-minded among them for years now."

"Presumably they won."

Marlene makes her fingers into the shape of a gun and fires it. "Since they're some of the last ones standing, yes."

Regulus hesitates. "Something big happened."

"It can't be much bigger than what's happening at home."

"Still. I've got a bad feeling about this."

Marlene shrugs. "You've got a bad feeling about everything."

Regulus pokes her in the eye with his finger. He's got increasingly good aim and almost always catches her after a blink these days. It's infuriating.

"I guess," he agrees, and says nothing else as they pick their way into the copse.

They're both still in their heavy coats. Both of them have gotten far better at moving quietly, too; nonetheless, Marlene is sure she's being watched. Birds rise from the trees as they clamber through the bushes, chittering nervously. Any one of them could be an animagus, watching, waiting. Ready to report back to their masters up ahead.

But if she shows weakness, Regulus will. And then they'll be two weak people in the middle of a snowstorm with enough blood on their hands to drown someone. Marlene keeps her mouth shut and her head down.

When light begins to peek through gaps in the trees ahead, their stumps sloping down as the earth descends towards the edge of a still blue lake, Marlene raises a hand to pull them both to a stop. She ducks low and pads the rest of the way to the treeline, staring out across a broad clearing ahead.

Past the decline towards the lake, the water stretches half a mile out ahead of them, edged by a heavy dirt shore. Pushed against the water's edge is a tall, stately home with a red roof and grey stone walls, lights on inside, the chimney smoking. There are no guards outside. Good.

Regulus crouches beside her. "That's our hit?"

"Think so," Dorcas murmurs. "We need to go east around it. Find a signpost or a gate. They keep their family names up on those. Come on."

She takes his wrist and pulls him along the cliff's edge. Regulus stumbles with her, pulling out of her grip. "I'm surprised you're checking," he mutters.

"I surprise everyone," Marlene replies. "Hurry up, Regulus, you're dawdling."

They skirt around the forest's edge to the west, wind in their faces from across the lake. Marlene keeps her knife in one hand and resists the urge to pull her lighter. She doesn't have to look at Regulus to know that he has done the same.

When they make it to a spot where they can spy the front gates, beyond which lies a long, well-kept garden, Marlene squints, spotting a marble plate set deep into a stone beam beside the iron bars. She crouches low into the bushes and Regulus kneels beside her.

"Can you see what it says?" she asks lowly.

Regulus peers across the frosty grass. He exhales and his breath fogs. "No," he says grimly. "You?"

“Not a fucking clue.” Marlene knocks her knuckles against the side of his head. “You’re up.”

“What the fuck?! Why!”

“Because I said it first.” Marlene jerks her head towards the gate. “Good luck, cowboy.”

“I despise you,” Regulus snarls. He peels himself to his feet and sways there for a moment, bouncing on the balls of his feet. Marlene can’t see anybody outside but that doesn’t mean there isn’t anybody in there looking out. As he prepares to run forwards, she prepares to leap back and disappear into the woods. She’ll leave him here if she has to.

In a burst of speed, Regulus rips from the treeline and pelts towards the gate.

No ward stops him. He makes it all the way to the gate and hesitates there, hovering, a small dark ghost; then, he makes a break for the treeline again, sprinting towards Marlene, who melts away from the bushes and into the shadows, scanning all the windows for movement. There is none.

Regulus crashes into the underbrush, clattering to his knees on the ground beside her. “Nobody saw me, I don’t think,” he gasps.

Marlene pulls him up. “What did you see?” she demands.

Panting, he shakes his head back and forth. “I... I’m not sure.”

“You didn’t read it?!” She grabs a fistful of his coat.

Regulus covers his face with his hands. "I did!" he says quickly. "It's— it was theirs. Maybe still is."

"But?"

"But someone's cracked the nameplate in half," Regulus replies, stumbling over his words. "I don't know why, I don't know who, but— someone broke it."

Marlene blinks. "And?" she asks impatiently.

Regulus disentangles her hand from his jacket and steps away, composing himself. "That's what they did to ours," he says stiffly. "The death eaters. My home in London. Once they knew we had betrayed them."

"Betrayed them?!"

"After my brother—"

Marlene waves her hands around. "I don't want to fucking hear it."

"You asked!" Regulus snaps. "Before they sent me to Durmstrang." His face closes off and he scowls at the ground. "It meant we were unworthy."

Marlene doesn't like how he says that, but can't put her finger on why. She shakes it off. "It's a broken nameplate," she says dismissively. "That could easily be weather, or age. It could be fucking anything."

"You," Regulus says with emphasis, "do not get to tell me I'm being paranoid. You, of all people."

"Come on. Let's get out of here." Marlene turns and strides off into the trees.

“Piss off!” Regulus shouts after her.

“That’s what I’m doing!” Marlene calls over her shoulder.

He runs after her. “Stop,” he demands. “Seriously, this one’s a bad idea—”

Marlene shoves him so hard he goes toppling into a tree, shouting out with pain. She doesn’t turn back to look at him; she just keeps walking and knows that eventually, he’ll catch up.

And it’s silly in a way. I am not a silly person; you know that about me. I’m an angry person and I’m not afraid to get my hands dirty. And I love you both but I don’t love you that much. But do I? I’ve done enough and said enough, if anybody’s counting. A kinder person might look at me out here with my lighter in my jacket and think I was doing it for you. On paper, I love you plenty.

I think this is what it is, I think I’ve got it, Dorcas: if there had not been a war, I would’ve gotten you a ring by now. Two rings. Three, if you both wanted me to wear one too. And I would’ve stayed. And even if love isn’t something I think I can do without training and practice, I would have done it anyway, and trained, and practiced; that’s what I’m best at. Training and practicing. Chipping away day by day at an enemy. Had it not been the war, I’ve got the clarity to guess that it would have been myself. Would that have been better? I don’t know, honestly. Maybe. I wish I could ask you. I wish you were here. I miss your face.

I’m trying to be honest.

By nightfall, when the darkness will cover them, they return to the Svoboda house with tanks of petrol and a grim sense of determination. Neither speaks as they descend the hillside towards the forest, dark in the distance, with their packs on their shoulders ready to run and their hands full of firestarters ready to throw.

"You still haven't told me our plan yet," Regulus says, breaking the silence, as they scuff along the road.

"Haven't I? It's a good one."

"Enlighten me, then."

Marlene spins her knife in her free hand, the others with its fingers stretched around the plastic grips of two tanks. "We don't really have one," she says.

"Oh. Great. I love dying painfully," Regulus replies.

"I know you so well."

A beat. "Tell me you've got ideas. Plausible ones."

"I've got ideas," Marlene repeats dutifully. "Plausible ones."

"Good." Regulus exhales shakily. "Now tell me the truth."

"I've got a sort of picture of it in my head," she admits. "Just follow my lead and we'll be fine. Did you see the sloped roof around the back? Easy."

Regulus chews on that for a bit. He doesn't answer. His silence speaks volumes: he does not think this will be easy.

“Okay,” Marlene says, getting a grip on the underside of the drainpipe. She hefts herself up atop the slanted tiles and shuffles her feet beneath her, lying back against the cold surface. “Just give me a sec and I’ll pull you up.”

Eyes huge in the darkness, Regulus stares around, twitching. “If I die here,” he says, “I’ll haunt you forever. I’ll haunt your children.”

“Tempted to leave you down there for implying I’ll ever have kids,” Marlene replies.

Regulus sticks a hand out. “Please,” he begs. “Marlene, please.”

He’s admittedly a bit out in the open right now. Marlene toys with the idea of leaving him standing at the base of the house for a moment before she sighs and sticks out her hand, taking his and yanking him up atop the drainpipe with her, where he crouches at her side, shoulders jerking as he pants.

“You fucking maniac,” Regulus rasps.

Marlene waves a tank of kerosene in his face. “We have to work quickly,” she reminds him, and begins clambering up the sloped rooftop to its peak, which rises into a red-plated steeple at the front of the house, overlooking the lake.

Regulus climbs behind her. Against the night, they move like shadows, fingers clawed around the roof tiles, prising them away from their cladding with faint creaks. Marlene spiders her way to the spire and stands up against it, one arm slung around its clay peak. She leans out over the dark abyss below, the water dark, chunks of ice floating on the top. Wind curses through her hair.

“Come on,” Regulus mutters behind her. “Come on, come—there! Got it.”

Marlene looks over his shoulder. He has pried a tile from the roof and set it atop the risen scar-like centre, which is knobbly and rusted. Beneath it, wood and insulation poke through.

“It’ll burn easily,” Marlene remarks.

Regulus looks up at her. “It will,” he agrees. “Come on, let’s move.”

Marlene pulls a tank from her hip and unscrews it. She plants her feet sideways down the slope to her left and prays not to slip, precariously letting go of the spire and letting gravity take hold. She slides a bit but doesn’t lose her balance. In a tossing motion, she begins sloshing fuel across the side of the roof.

Regulus takes the opposite side. Not speaking, they crawl together from one end to the other, dousing the drainpipes and bronzed gables in the stinking fluid. Marlene makes it to the other end and tosses her empty tanks off the side. It clatters to the ground far below, a faint, echoing sound.

She slips a little. Frantic, Marlene furls her bruised hands over the vertex of the rooftop and heaves herself up it, feet scraping the tiles. She pulls herself up to its peak and lies there with her arms wrapped around it, breathing hard.

On the other side, Regulus throws his own tanks over. He turns to grin at her. “You—” he starts.

A shingle comes loose under his left foot and he goes plummeting backwards. Marlene lunges forwards and slides down the other slope; she feels her ankle catch

around the crest and stretches out a hand— Regulus is already halfway off the roof, he grapples and slips and— his hand snags around hers, and Marlene catches him two-handed, all of the rest of him dangling over the riverbank metres below.

“Shit,” Regulus gasps, legs kicking. “Oh Merlin. Oh fuck. Oh, fuck, please.”

“I’ve got you,” Marlene grunts. She begins trying to heave him up and the effort is immense; it burns all along the sides of her ribs and up her underarms and through her legs. The rooftop is cutting into the top of her foot.

Regulus’ wide, terrified eyes meet hers. He kicks off the wall, flailing. “Please! PLEASE!”

“Stop fucking shouting!” Marlene hisses. She tries again. “And flailing, just— calm down—”

“I can’t calm down!”

“I won’t drop you!”

Regulus’ eyes are streaming now. He has it on his face again, that real-fear look he had when the owl came for him. He tries to haul himself up and can’t, hands grappling around hers, nails digging in so hard they draw blood. His feet scrabble up the wall again. Any moment now, they will be overheard.

The world seems to slow for a moment or two, a moment that is only Marlene’s; she hoards it like a dragon hoards gold. The stars lurch overhead and she feels the wetness of fresh blood in her palms, making her grip slick. Her arms burn and she thinks, *I have a life in my hands. I have the*

choice in my grip, whether you live or die. I am giving and taking the mercy.

She thinks of Mary and Dublin. Cold, long nights and the forsaking of themselves when they were both too young to have chosen it. Marlene thinks she would like to know what it felt like to be the one with the bullets.

She loosens her grip just slightly. Just to see.

Regulus screams. Feeling like a stranger, Marlene reasserts her grip and, with a burst of strength, heaves him up over the edge. He crawls over the drainpipe and lies on the cold undulating roof in front of her, gasping and sobbing.

“Fuck,” Marlene curses. She hefts herself to sit atop the ridge, shaking her foot around; she can feel blood in her boot. “That was exciting. Come on, let’s light this thing—”

Quicker than a gunshot, Regulus whips his knife out and stabs her in the shin, *hard*. To the left of the bone. The knife goes all the way through and the tip comes out the other side.

He pulls it out and wipes it. “That was for almost killing me,” he snaps. “You’re evil. An evil, twisted— I— I don’t even know why I stay.”

Marlene clutches at her leg, biting hard on her tongue. “You little *cunt*,” she growls.

Regulus bares his teeth at her. “You almost dropped me,” he emphasises, voice breaking.

“But I didn’t.”

“But you thought about it.”

Marlene staggers to her feet. Her injured leg buckles under her but she holds herself up with the other and a hand beneath her. "I'm getting you back for that one later," she promises. "I should have kicked you off myself."

Regulus drags himself up to crouch at her side. He tilts his chin up. "Get your lighter out," he snaps.

Marlene reaches into her jacket and grabs it. She struggles across to the steeple, dragging her bloody leg behind her and struggling not to overbalance. She reaches it and throws her arms around it, heaving herself upright. Regulus takes the other side. The lake looms beneath them.

"Ready?" Marlene asks.

"I hope you drown," snarls Regulus.

"I won't drown alone," she promises. She flicks open the lighter and tosses it — it arcs high through the air and lands in the drainpipe at the other end of the house, which catches alight like a viking funeral. Marlene sees the lurching fire rush at her and feels Regulus' hands clawing into her arm— she swings backwards and hurls herself off the roof— the dark water rises fast beneath her and she hits it and sinks into the murky depths below.

Here's my honesty, as best I can put it: I wish I'd done a lot of things differently. Maybe if I'd stayed you could have domesticated me. I'd stand like a dog at your heel, Dorcas, you're probably the only person in the world I could say that to. You'd be sad for me and worry about me and I would like that. We would fight them all off together. And my family are all probably dead right now, which I try not to think about, but you would cry, and so would Mary. I could live through you both. You could hold my grief in your

hands and I'd be able to look at it without wishing it wasn't there.

If I'd stayed, maybe I'd be dead by now. Or you would be. Or by some butterfly effect, we would have ended up scattered anyway. Thinking about it fucks with my head. You fuck with my head. You, the you I'm imagining. Christ, Dorcas. This is starting to sound like a goodbye.

It's not a goodbye, though. When I'm done writing this, it goes on the pyre like all the rest. I've made all my baggage into a fucking burning. And for all I'm talking a big game about doing things differently, I wouldn't change that for anything. I would burn it again and again and again and again. As many times as I can write that. Again again again.

The dark green underbelly of the lake fans out around Marlene. She opens her eyes in the water and sees, against its underside, the waving of seaweed and a passing shoal of fish. She doesn't hesitate; she begins to swim.

There is light against the water's underside. Fire, she thinks at first, slightly vindicated. Her fire. But it's the wrong colour, green and purple and gold. Spells. Magic. *Shit.*

Marlene swims harder, not coming up for air. She prays she cannot be seen and even as her lungs burn, she presses on, clawing through the water at the very bottom, the misted mud at the bed beneath her rusting in front of her vision. Ahead, she spies rock, the cliffside the lake is set against. She pushes towards it.

Someone tries to grab onto her wrist. Some creature, Marlene thinks at first, bizarrely and without much sense to

any of her thoughts; she whips around in the water and kicks out. It's Regulus — she spies his dark hair fanning out in the waves — and her boot catches him across the nose. He grabs at his face, bubbles pouring from his mouth, and bobs to the surface.

Marlene swims onwards, feet digging into the lake's bottom as she curses across it. She passes through dark masses of seaweed and the green gets darker and denser as she presses into deeper waters. Her lungs are on fire. There is a mounting pressure on either side of her skull, as if her brain is going to burst out. Both of her ears pop.

Her hands, stretched out in front of her, find stone. Marlene breaks the surface against the cliff's edge and finds herself in near total darkness, hidden behind an outcropping of rock that conceals her from the house. There are shouts — dark-robed figures are milling around the outside of the burning manor, some casting aguamenti charms, others at the water's edge.

And out in the centre of the lake, there is a struggle; two of the robed figures are hauling Regulus out to the shore, dragging his kicking body through the water.

Marlene shuffles up to wrap a hand around the jagged top of the outcropping. With shaking arms, she hauls herself on top of it and begins scaling the cliffside, thinking any moment she will be seen and apprehended.

But evidently, Regulus is making enough of a fuss to cover her. He screams bloody, gargling murder as they drag him through the waves. There are scattered laughs and shouts of anger.

Marlene hefts herself to the crest of the cliff and, wet hands slipping on the rock, pushes herself up one last time, up and

onto the top. There, she scrambles to dive into the bushes, crouching in the treeline and watching intently.

The men drag Regulus ashore, tossing him onto the wet dirt. He scrambles on his back away from them, the heels of his hands digging into the greyish sand. But he's surrounded; five or six of the figures crowd around him, speaking in murmurs Marlene can't make out.

"Please," Regulus shouts, the first thing Marlene understands. "Please, it wasn't me— let me go—"

One of the men laughs. "It wasn't him!" he calls to the gathered group. "Did you hear that?"

He's British. From Yorkshire or similar, from what Marlene can gauge of his accent.

Regulus was right. These are death eaters.

"I swear," the kid gasps, "I saw the one on the roof who— I —"

He's a startlingly good liar when he wants to be, but he isn't Marlene. He trails off, unable to think quickly enough. Even from here, Marlene can see him tremble.

One of the death eaters kneels in front of him, wand out and pointed at his chest.

"Crucio," he says simply.

Regulus screams. It's more like the bark of a fox or the dying hark of a rabbit than a human noise, pitchy and rising, slipping over gravel in his throat. Rattling. It echoes around like a church choir.

Marlene presses further into the trees. She doesn't pray — she isn't the praying type. All she can do is watch, transfixed, as he writhes in the dirt, bits of it sticking to him.

It takes ten, eleven, twelve (Marlene counts) seconds for the death eater to let up the curse. Regulus goes limp, gasping.

"Who do you work for?" the death eater demands. "Tell us — or we'll be forced to surrender you to our commander."

Regulus rolls onto his side, clutching at his chest. He coughs lamely. His skinny shoulders jump.

"Please," he gasps. "Please. I don't work for anyone. I promise."

"Tell us!" the death eater bellows. And then, with the air that he's done this many times before, "Accio thumbnail!"

There's a horrific tearing sound. Regulus screams again. His nail comes tearing off, a string of bloody skin with it, into the death eater's hand, who tosses it into the lake.

"Please." Regulus is sobbing now. "Please." It isn't clear what he's begging for.

Marlene pulls herself to her feet. She plants one foot forwards — maybe to create a diversion, she isn't sure — and can't do it. No fucking way is she dying for this kid. She'd rather off herself. She sinks back into the shadows.

"Go get the commander," the ringleader spits to another. And, when they hesitate, "GO!"

The other scampers off, running to the crowd helping to pull goods and people from the spreading blaze. It's a testament to Marlene's skill that the fire is still raging even with five wizards trying to cast it out. For a brief flash, she's proud.

Regulus rolls onto his front. For an electric second, he sees her through the legs of the death eaters — he and Marlene make sudden, distinct eye contact. Marlene pulls a face. Regulus, tears in his eyes, ducks his head low to the ground, looking away.

There's a sudden commotion to Marlene's left. She peers across at the burning house in time to see, from its fiery innards, there spill a tall, dark-haired woman, brushing off her robes. She has a capering stride that might have once been elegant and walks in a sort of heavy-footed strut out onto the shore, twirling her wand in her hand.

The commander. Marlene doesn't recognise her but feels in the back of her mind that she knows exactly who this woman is.

She descends to the beach, long shadow fanning out across the dirt and the shallows before her. "This is our arsonist, then?" she asks. She lodges a steel-toed shoe beneath Regulus and flips him over. The rest of the death eaters back off fast.

Regulus cowers, holding his hands up over his face. A moment later, however, he stops, staring up with huge eyes at the woman.

They watch one another intently. It hits Marlene who this must be.

"Bella," Regulus says. "Oh fuck."

Bellatrix Lestrange kneels down at Regulus' side, still twirling her wand in circles in her hand. She presses it into his cheek hard.

"Well," she caws, in her high, clear voice. "This is where you got to. You know, Reggie, your mother has been worried sick."

Regulus has gone still as the dead. No longer is he struggling or trying to get away. He might as well be a washed-up fish.

"I wouldn't have thought you so disloyal to your blood," Bellatrix continues. "Taking after our brother, are we?" And, when Regulus doesn't say anything, "Answer me, boy." She stabs the wand so hard into his cheek that it divots in and in and must hurt like nothing else.

Regulus clears his throat. "It wasn't me," he says, slightly calmer now, though it's forced. Even from here, Marlene can hear the panic simmering in his voice. "I was trying to find you, Bella, I've been tracking you down. I got here in time to see the arsonist jump into the lake— I saw them swim, I was trying to catch them."

Lestrange hums. "Tracking me," she says with an amount of appreciation. "You were always the smarter of you and the wretch. How far have you been following me?"

"Since—" Regulus coughs. "Since the Dark Lord sent you out of Britain, I've been keeping an eye on you. And when they based you here, it took me a while— but with the takeover, I knew he would have put you in a high seat of power, being so loyal to him. It didn't take long to figure out."

Lestrangle hesitates. She pulls her wand away. “Regulus,” she murmurs. “The lion star.” She seems lost in thought.

Regulus scrambles to sit up slightly. He reaches out a hand to take her wrist. “Cousin,” he rasps. “It’s so good to see you again. You don’t know how much I missed—”

Bellatrix backhands Regulus hard across the face. It’s a whip-crack sound and Regulus is sent rolling to the side with the force, clutching his cheek, which is split and bleeding on one of her rings.

The commander draws herself to her full height. She plunges a foot down in the centre of Regulus’ chest and presses her weight on top of him, raising her elbows like a little kid, as if she’s trying to break his ribs open.

“I would believe your likely story,” she hisses. “But I’m not based here, Reggie, and I never was. You can’t lie to me; it won’t work. My work for the Dark Lord is far more important.”

Regulus coughs and gasps. He doesn’t answer for a terrible stretch of time; eventually, he chokes out, “I know what job he has for you. But I can’t say it in front of—” He waves a hand. “These. Get off me— I can’t breathe—”

Bellatrix grinds her heel down harder. “Deceiving your way out won’t work,” she taunts. “My work for my Lord is far too private for—”

Regulus lunges his face up towards her. He gasps, “He has you hiding one of them, doesn’t it?”

It’s like something has exploded nearby. Bellatrix goes perfectly still.

Bingo, thinks Marlene. *You clever bastard. You devious little rat.* It was a high-risk gamble and he took it.

And evidently, he hit the jackpot.

Bellatrix stares around at her men. She raises her wand high and from its tip expands a colossal bang, louder than ten gunshots.

“LEAVE US!” she screams.

The death eaters scatter. Bellatrix kneels low, to Regulus’ side, and ducks her head to speak with him, far too low for Marlene to hear.

Fuck. Marlene shuffles closer to the edge— she thinks if she gets close enough she could read Bellatrix’ lips. She folds like a snake from the bushes and right to the overhang above the water, which the firelight hits and casts alive in small, refracted lights like stars.

She sees Bellatrix touch Regulus’ hair and Regulus shudders violently. They speak lowly still, Regulus frantic, Lestranger very languid.

If Marlene could just— just—

“There!” a death eater shouts. “THE GIRL!”

Marlene whips to her feet and, a moment later, ducks beneath a flying killing curse that burns into the tree behind her — she doesn’t look at Regulus or the death eaters or even the moon, she only takes off into the darkness behind her and runs.

So I'll leave off on this, because I get the impression this might be the last letter I write for a while: Dorcas Meadows, you have yet to come rescue me from myself, and I don't think that's a personal failing but a very selfish bit of me wishes you had. I think I'm too far gone now. Going too long without blood in my mouth makes me nauseous. Thinking of you makes me nauseous. There's almost nothing left that doesn't make me nauseous.

My fingers hurt. The beginnings of frostbite, I think. I've got four infected cuts and they all fucking smell. I need a shower. This isn't very pretty is it? I'm not worried about them, you know. I've had plenty until now and none of them have stuck around. I think that's a sort of fate. God or whoever is pushing me forwards to do this. And to do it right.

Lights flare and whizz through the forest around her, swooping and screaming, in all manner of colours — she sees a tourmaline coloured hex crash through the trees to her left and overhead, jade green, something that catches fire, she remembers in a haze, though she doesn't know where from. Padfoot's Army or Dublin or some other place she left behind. Marlene plunges through the trees like a hunted animal and does not stop running for even a moment to admire the colours nor the memories. She refuses to die tonight.

Did Remus Lupin prepare for this, she wonders, when he came hunting her? Did Lily? Her old friends turned hectic, screaming nightmares; Marlene wishes, perversely, that they were here to watch her run. Then they might understand why she needs to do this. What she comes up against every day. They might understand.

Marlene goes flying, tripping over a root — she crashes to the ground and scrapes all the skin off her forearms, almost screaming out. Thundering footsteps crunch and storm around her, pushing through the trees. She pushes herself up, bleeding heavily, and—

Through the branches crashes, bleeding from the mouth, Regulus. He takes her arm and pulls her up. “Got away from Bella,” he gasps.

“How the fuck did you—” Marlene hacks out a piece of dirt or a pebble or an animal dropping or something. “How did you know—?”

“Guess,” Regulus says, sounding like he doesn’t believe it himself. “Blind guess— I needed to say something that would shock her— and if she hadn’t known what I was talking about, it would’ve gotten her curious, jealous, she would’ve kept me alive until I told her what I meant.”

“She would’ve tortured you, you can’t handle that.”

“I can handle it if I have to — you never met my mother, evidently. Us Blacks get our hands dirty.”

“You’re all maniacs,” Marlene spits, with enough malice that she can get it out of her mouth at all. “Come on, let’s get out of here.”

Regulus takes her wrist and they fly through the trees together, tight to each other’s sides. Marlene feels the wind in her hair and clothes and caressing her aching face — she’s dripping still, frozen to the bone, but she has in her hands the chance to light another fire soon, and another, and another. She has the chance to never stop doing this.

Overhead, the night sky is full of reddened smoke. Through the trees, Marlene sees the clawed fingers of spell stains, ricocheted from the trees into the night sky and leaving bright trails behind. It's beautiful, sort of. She almost runs into a tree and Regulus laughs at her and seems to mean it.

Marlene sinks a foot into a pit and leaps over another tree root, rising to the night like a bird. She soars over a log and crunches to the ground in full sprint. She is made entirely of the hunt. It has swallowed her.

At her shoulder, Regulus' feet stutter across the ground and he staggers for a moment. It's a moment too long.

From the trees behind them, a huge death eater clambers, roaring. The sound cuts open the quiet. Marlene whips around and catches a glimpse of white mask glaring through the dark.

Her wrist is dropped. Regulus swears and sprints to the left, melting into the shadows. Marlene dives right; the man raises his wand and she makes it out of his eyeline— but through the leaves anyway, into the ditch she has dived into, comes his red sparking stunner.

She is less human than mortal god, Marlene is sure. Still, she passes out instantly. Her last thought is that they might not find her here. She thinks she sees Dorcas in her dreams. Holding those chains. Laughing.

I love you. Or I think I do. If this isn't love, it's something else that I can't put a name to, and I can't think of a quote for this, it's been so fucking long since I last read a book. What the hell? I need to pick one up one of these days. I think of you in the pages and put your face to every character as if that will keep you alive. Maybe that makes

me a bit fucked in the head. Do you do it too? Do you feel me when I'm not there? Does Mary? God, I haven't written to Mary in a bit. I don't have nightmares about her body anymore either. Just her face. Smiling at me. She's there everywhere. So are you.

If you ever think of me again, I want you to know this: I am never going to die either.

- Marlene McKinnon.

When Marlene wakes up, all she can see is colour. Dawn is coming up overhead and for the first time in weeks, it isn't grey; the whole sky is pure, pale orange, a sort of peach colour, streaked with lines where the clouds cast shadows behind them against the rising sun. She can't feel her legs or any of her fingers. Her heartbeat is running slow in her ears. *Thump-thump. Thump-thump. You live another day.*

Slowly, she tries to raise a hand to feel at her aching chest. It trembles on the way up; she's cold; her clothes are wet. She's shivering all over. She clutches at the top of her chest and feels for a wound. There isn't one. Only the bruise left by the stunner.

Last night returns to her in flashes. She remembers fire, whipping towards her across a sheet of dripping gasoline, and water around her; blood, the smell and sight of it. She remembers being underwater, its deep, impenetrable gloom around her. She remembers lurching to her feet from a hiding place and running until everything hurt all over.

None of it quite knots together. She feels around for her knife and clutches it in her hand. Slowly, she tries to sit up, groaning.

There's someone beside her; they're crawling through the bushes to her. Marlene sees their dark shape out of the corner of her eye.

With a shout, she lurches around, brandishing her knife towards them; she is blind, only the fiery sky and the long-limbed trees visible, the sole occupants of this strange new world. There is a cry close to her, not her own; Marlene overbalances, tumbling forwards, and her knife sinks into flesh.

Someone swears furiously. "Stop—"

But she can't stop. Marlene is more knife and blood and tearing muscle than consciousness, and she rakes the blade backwards again, screeching, flailing and fighting. If she's going down, she's taking another with her. She refuses to die alone.

She finds flesh again, feeling the fleshy tear of it coming open at the metal tip. Skin has a tension to it like the outside of a bird's breast. When it comes open, it does so like the release of air in a balloon.

Someone grabs her wrist. Marlene is still swiping at the open air and there is someone trying to take her knife from her. Face in the dirt, she scratches and claws, kicking out; she finds flesh a third time— there is a terrible, sudden pain in the side of her stomach, right in her gut.

Marlene goes very still. The hand trying to take her weapon snatches it from her and someone is pushing away. They kick dirt and leaves across her face. She isn't sure what's happening anymore. She had thought it was an attacker but now she isn't sure.

"Oh, no," says the voice. "Oh no. Oh no. Oh, fuck."

With all the strength in her body, Marlene rolls onto her back. She clutches her stomach and blood meets her fingertips. There's dirt in her face, scraping under her eyelids as she blinks, raking across her pupils; she can't see, she can only make out the huge fuzzed outlines of the grit sitting atop her vision.

"What's happening?" she gasps. "What— what—"

Someone touches her shoulders. The faint outline of a figure lurches into view. Pale with unkempt dark hair. Blue lips.

"Regulus," Marlene grunts. "Regulus, help me— help—"

But Regulus doesn't help. He just sits over her, still, watching. He's swearing still, in a steady, constant stream. The hand on her shoulder sinks to her midriff and hovers there.

"Oh, Merlin," he whispers. "Oh no."

Marlene grips him, trying to find with one hand his wrist and then forearm, and then the side of his neck. "What did you do to me?" she demands. "Regulus. Regulus, don't you dare lie to me."

Regulus pushes his face into his hands and cries out into them. Marlene still can't see well. She spits out some dirt and mud and mostly blood. It's gotten warmer through the night. No longer does her breath mist in front of her face.

"Shit," Regulus shouts into his palms. "I'm so sorry. I'm so —"

Marlene manages to tilt her head low enough to see her stomach. The patch of blood is huge and growing larger; it

has spread almost entirely across the front of her sweatshirt. It used to belong to someone else. She doesn't remember who.

"Hang on," Regulus is telling her. "Just— just hang on— I can fix this. Fuck. Shit."

"You stabbed me," she mumbles, blood on her tongue and growing viscous there. "You stabbed me in the gut, Regulus. You really did it."

"Marlene—"

"I had thought I'd do it first. Guess now." She laughs, utterly mad even to her own ears. "This whole time I worried about the Order. And it was you."

"Marlene, I can fix this—"

"You don't need to. I'm fine. Let's go."

With one hand, Marlene wipes her eyes. It only serves to dig the grit in deeper. She pushes the other hand beneath her and sits up— the world tilts— the pain, it's a brand, a wildfire. She tries to stumble to her feet and collapses. Everything blacks out for a while.

When Marlene comes back, she's on her back again. Regulus is sitting against a tree stump nearby with his head in his hands. The world has gone fuzzy. The peachy sky is abating to a glass-clear blue. It's speckled with bright, small clouds now, headed north.

"I'm dying, then," Marlene remarks.

Regulus stares through his fingers at her. "I guess," he says, voice shaking.

“Well, shit.”

He shuffles a bit closer to her, still hesitant, as if unsure whether she'll try to kill him too. And Marlene would, but she has no knife; and she would do it with her hands in that case, but she has no strength left, nor sharp enough fingernails to rip his throat open into halves in her palms.

“You should run,” Marlene croaks. “Did you kill them?”

“Of course I didn't kill them. I lost them,” Regulus says. Then, choked with tears, “I came back for you. I came back and dragged your body away.”

Marlene looks up at him. He's holding his thigh together; it has been split open all the way down the side, two chunks of flesh barely clinging to the bone. Her work. She's almost proud. But he won't bleed out from that; it's not nearly deep nor wide enough.

“Did you,” Regulus rasps, stalling. “Did you have anybody you wanted me to...?”

Marlene heaves a long breath in. “Nah,” she says after a moment. “I think I've done all I need to do.”

“You want me to tell them back home that you were the arsonist?”

“Sure. It'll be a fun wartime legend.”

Regulus reaches out and, with surprising tenderness, he brushes Marlene's hair out of her face. His fingers ghost across her cheek, very cold. Marlene watches the sky still, the widest and freest place on earth.

“I can still save you,” he croaks. “I could still...”

But he can't. He knows it as well as Marlene does. He trails off and that's that.

Marlene hacks a bit of blood out of her throat. "Well then," she whispers. "Bye, Reg."

Regulus sits closer still; his hands rake across her, suddenly frantic. "No! I can't just— you can't just— you can't leave me—"

But Marlene feels, as if it's the drumming of fingers against her collarbone, the stutter and slow of her staggering heart. She reaches a hand to the sky once more and thinks that the war surely will have been worth it. She doesn't think that at all; she isn't so noble. She thinks, *let the fire never go out. Let me never be at peace. Let me— let me—* and she wishes to have been kissed one last time. Then, nothing at all.

END OF PART TWO

Chapter End Notes

- [Official Tumblr](#)
- [Twitter Quotes Bot](#) (admin: [lupinlesbian](#))
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KOLKA

Chapter Notes

PART THREE LET'S GO!!

normal warnings etc etc. also the same disclaimer i made at the start of part two: this is a major change of pace from the previous part, and a lot of stuff has been shifted around, and it'll feel jarring at first, but bear with me, okay? it's aaaalll gonna be fine. <3

enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

PART THREE - ATONEMENT

Dorcas,

Hail, fair sir! Hail? Hark? I just asked Remus which is right and he said hark but I don't think he actually knows. So. Take that with a grain of salt. I guess.

How are you? I don't think I've written since New Years. And I know that isn't long but I guess it feels weird not to have spoken to you. The separation has been sort of hard. I can hear you laughing at that in my head. But it's true. It's been... a lot to adjust to. All of this.

How's Mary doing? Someone would have told us if the situation had changed but I still worry. I don't know. I guess after all this time, it feels like I hardly know her anymore. Do you feel the same? Probably not. I hope you two are getting along. I really do. I've been okay. Overall okay. Sort

of. Being out of London has helped; I can breathe better out here, by the ocean. The walls of this place still haven't fallen in yet, so we're confident it'll hold steady until winter ends. Or I'm confident, I guess. Sirius and Remus don't seem confident in much of anything right now.

That was a mean thing to say. I don't mean by that that I think... I don't know why I'm defending myself to you, actually. You don't like them anyway. But I've not been happier than this in as long as I can remember, not since Lambeth, anyway. Being with them is healing. And slowly but surely, we're pulling back together. I guess it just sucks that it's slowly.

Sirius has night terrors a lot. Not like ours — they're loud, big, screaming things, it makes him freak out and pace around for hours and apparate around Europe and not tell us where he's gone. It makes me remember fifth year. We didn't know each other back then — I think I barely knew your name — but you know what I mean. I think we all felt it. That sort of voyeuristic... proxy thing, it was horrid, looking back now, but the sort of feeling that Sirius or what he left behind was something to peer in on. A small piece of the war, not a human being. But I'm holding the pieces of him in my hands right now and I guess it has made it all feel more immediate and more real and also less of both of those things. He's really fucked up. I don't really know where to start with that.

But we're all alive. That's what matters. Remus is antsy and doesn't like letting us out of his sight. We took our first moon all together in years the other day. It felt like I was healthy and not unwell and not tired for the first time since all of this started. I felt like myself again. And they keep telling me I need to be careful and gentle and that I need to

heal, but I felt as healed as I'll ever get then. I have to be thankful for that. I have to be thankful for something.

I love you. Sorry it's been so long. I'll come see you soon, I promise. I still have a Christmas present for you! I think Lils got you something too.

Yours,

James Potter.

PS: still no word on Marlene?

The house has not fallen — that much is one of the few truths James has told in the past few days — but it feels often like it will. He isn't sure where they would go from there. Move again, he supposes. Find a new hideaway which the world has forgotten and hunker down there, tied together, the three of them, never untangled even for a moment these days. And it's nice that way, but it's sort of grotesque, too. Since the Sanctuary fractured, James has no longer felt like a wound, but one in a row of three sutures. They are all grasping at the seams of a yellowing gouge and trying to hold it together.

Latvia is dark this time of year. There is little daylight. He gets out when he can, though he can't walk far, and sits on the cliffs overlooking the ocean with the water spraying in his face and leaving his lips salty. In the rare bright days, it's beautiful. But it's mostly grey.

Remus comes with him sometimes, though not often. Remus is less a person right now than he is a lost compass, sort of confused, spinning most of the time. Tugged in a couple of hundred different directions. He writes a lot of letters and balls them up and throws them away. He follows Sirius to

the doorway when Sirius leaves on hunts and they rage and shout at each other about it until they seem to remember James is there too and they stop. Anger, as it exists between the two of them, is a very private thing. James feels like he doesn't belong here whenever they fight.

But Remus is still Remus. And in that way, even after all this time, it manages to feel like the summer after fifth. The ocean and the two of them, and Sirius, who is a sort of ghost that lives in their house. The fact that he is tangibly here this time makes less difference than James might have thought.

They set ground rules. None of them are verbalised, but all of them know them. *We don't talk about this. We don't bring it up. There are skeletons piled into our closet, and we're adding to the hoard.*

"I was going to bake," Remus says one morning.

James flinches and almost slips off the rock he's sitting on, overlooking the cliffside. There's a small bay to the west of their ramshackle farmhouse, insulated by Sirius' shaky warmth charms and pure force of will, and on the other side lies Kolka, with its high-steepled white church and its dotted houses scattered along the oceanside. He's got the wind in his face and the ocean roaring thirty feet below, and didn't hear Remus coming.

"Christ," he mutters, shaking out his hands, rattling his chest around a bit to feel the familiar, discordant click in it. "Sorry. I'm a bit... all over the place today."

"It's fine." Silently, Remus sits on the rock beside him. His leg presses along James', along the whole thigh. He looks out over the black ocean and says nothing.

“Bake?” James prompts after a while.

Remus shrugs. “For him, I mean,” he elaborates. “He gets home from that hunt tonight. I was going to make something. We could go to Kolka, nick ingredients with the cloak. Just... I don’t know. A cake. Maybe.”

It’s still the last dregs of January. There are no birthdays, and none of them felt like celebrating the arrival of 1978. Christmas was dour too; James was still bedridden then, and Sirius still half catatonic, shuffling around the house as if he was a wounded animal. So there’s nothing to celebrate, really, unless you believe in making up for lost time, which James doesn’t anymore.

“Okay,” he agrees, still unsure why. “Is there an occasion?”

Remus’ hair has gotten overgrown. In the wind it buffets and tickles James’ neck. “Nah. I guess it’s just the thought that counts. He doesn’t eat enough.”

James nudges Remus in the ribs, feeling like a small bird. “You worry too much.” Maybe the wrong thing to say. He’s sure he’ll come apart if someone looks at him the wrong way these days.

And Remus doesn’t look at him, which is worse. “I know that,” he murmurs.

“I’ll help you with it.”

“You should rest.”

“All I do is rest.”

Remus does look at him then, very unimpressed. “You were out on a job yesterday. Reasonably speaking, that means

you should have today off.”

“Reasonably speaking, I want to bake a cake with you.”

“Is the ‘with me’ part inextricable from the experience?” He sounds mildly amused now.

“Yeah,” James says. “Course it is. It’s you.”

Remus looks down at his knees. He looks less like Sirius these days than he has in years. Sirius has a sharper nose. James feels like he spends most of his time documenting both of their faces as if he’ll never get a chance again. And he looks now, hungrily, learning. He wants to see and never stop seeing.

“Right,” Remus murmurs, seeming to sense the gaze.

James looks away at the rolling water. The rare jewel sunlight. He breathes in through his nose and the smell of the Baltic Sea rasps around in his throat and his airway, taking root there. “Come on. If we get out to the town before noon, we could have it done by the time he gets back.”

Remus stands. He pulls James up, gentle as he’s always been. At least that hasn’t changed. They start back towards the house together; James makes a very conscious effort not to limp or falter. And light comes down from the whole sky. A ravishing white light.

It has been like this for some time.

The Keepers of the Sanctuary took fifteen minutes, maybe less, to come around to the idea; by which point Lily had

already begun drawing up maps. She's like that recently, even more than she used to be. She plunges into plans with the surety that the sun rises. James hasn't seen her in two weeks, since she last visited their tiny corner of the coast, and he misses her like an organ, a lung.

She was the one that decided that the three of them should hide out away from the new central spots for the resistance: Nanterre, Portofino, Dublin. James remembers, through the haze of pain that was that night, and the fall, he remembers — he's not sure he remembers it right— but he's sure he started shouting and she completely ignored him. She just looked dead at Sirius, hard-eyed, and he looked back at her and nodded. He must have known then that he would not be returning to Reykjavik.

Somehow, they dragged him out to Kolka. One of the Keepers sourced the house and dumped the three of them in the doorway, by which point Remus was more translucent than he was corporeal; someone summoned a mattress, James isn't sure if it was Sirius or the stranger accompanying them, and he fell asleep almost instantly there, long legs dangling off the side. James, ears ringing and lungs shrivelled like peppercorns, sat at the derelict table in what had once been the kitchen; Sirius cast *lumos*, staring at his arm like it was a fourth person who had intruded on their new safe place; they leant against each other on broken, rickety chairs and stayed like that until morning. James reunited with Sirius' shoulder and with his hands and his hair. It felt like a cure for an unnameable sickness.

Fixing the house was its own project, and none of them really had the energy for it, but they tried regardless, feeling like they had to do something with their time lest it eat them alive. James did the sitting work and Remus did

the real stuff. Fixing drain pipes and removing rusted screws from the doorframe. Sirius did the magic stuff.

With the new year came the hunts. Claude Archembeau has Sirius more than Remus and James have him at this point. Evidently, they're working him to the bone, because he always comes back cold and bruised with the blackness under the skin of his forearm flowering like foxgloves.

It's for the best, he told James the last time he left. The greater good. Once we've got enough cures for everyone in Nanterre, I can stop striking out so much. Lily's getting better at this. She can take over for me.

And when will there be enough? Remus asked bitterly from across the room.

Sirius didn't answer.

James is surviving, and that's all he could have hoped for. It's better than London by miles. He keeps having to remind himself of it. *You're alive. You lived. You're alive.*

And still, they don't talk about it.

Remus does make a cake that afternoon, though. It's one promise kept. James wonders if he should start keeping track. A sweetbread loaf with a cranberry heart. Remus used to make bread, what feels like years ago. James remembers watching the hypnotic twisting and pressing of his hands around the dough. This time, he watches still, feeling less welcome to do so now.

After Remus has shuffled the loaf into the oven, which they only repaired last week, he sits opposite James at the table. Their socked feet brush and jump apart beneath them.

“Sorry,” Remus says.

“Sorry,” James mumbles in turn.

They go quiet again.

It’s not the worst place James has ever lived. The last time someone lived here was probably the mid-sixties; whoever it was has likely moved into Kolka seeking work. The Keeper put up muggle-repelling charms before he left without another word to any of them. Nobody has cleaned the windows and they’re all thick with hazy, yellow dust, filtering all the light warm and greyish. The whole house is wooden and it shakes with the wind off the coast. It has foundations of stone and the floor is, too, which makes the whole place freezing at night.

James lives, more than he lives in this house itself, in the clothes of the other two. He’s been in Remus’ sweatshirts and jumpers since they got here and isn’t about to quit the habit. His hair has started to grow out and he keeps imagining what it would be like to grow it out and out until it got as long as Sirius’, which is past his elbows now and hangs in a curly mess around him most days, unkempt, frizzing at the edges. They all carry knives with them most of the time, even when they’re inside, tucked into pockets, folded into shoes. James spends whole nights studying Sirius’ new tattoos sometimes just to feel sane. He’s never felt more like he’s living in a skin that is not his own. He’d like to make a nest here, wherever *here* is.

They have rugs, at least, to lay across the stone; they have the cloak, so they steal the food they need. They have moth-bitten curtains to draw in the evenings and Sirius can bring light when they need it. They have each other. Even if having is, in this sense, abstract. Removed. It’s less having

than it is observing. They're conducting experiments rather than doing anything conclusive with the findings. James feels like he's spent more of the past month watching Sirius than talking to him, and when they do speak, it's not about anything that matters. It's names, mostly. Each other's and sometimes Remus'. Heavy sighs and the general impression that, here, verbalisations are taking the place of sounds of pain.

"Won't be long now," Remus offers conversationally. "Til he gets back."

"If he's late, we can eat it ourselves," James parries.

Remus laughs and looks away at nothing in particular. At the wall, at the skeleton hangnail frame of an old rack for wine and spirits, still sitting across the room, unused. The sun has already started to sink out of sight through the window. The walls creak and moan.

"I guess we can," he says. "I should see if Lily's willing to stay the night."

"You know she'll say no."

"Then share the cake."

"You'd have to get Archembeau in on it," grumbles James. "And they'll say no."

"I can be persuasive," Remus says reasonably. "Hey. Look at me."

James obeys. Remus takes his jaw in his hand and picks an eyelash off the top of his cheek, very tentative. It's a gentle thing and James leans into the touch. They stay like that for a while after the lash is gone. Jaw in hand and hand tilted so

the bone of the wrist whines a bit; James feels it in his bones, can almost hear the otolith rumble. He closes his eyes. The hand stays.

Remus lets go all at once. He gets to his feet and presses across the room to the oven, peering in at their small yield.

"I think the oven might be too hot," he mutters.

"I'm going to write to Lily," James says, more to himself than Remus. "So she can take it with her if she doesn't stay."

Remus nods absently, fiddling with the knobs atop the steel opening. And James writes his letter. And he doesn't get it right.

Sirius gets home late. It's pitch black outside and James and Remus have already gotten through half of the overcooked cake together, a team effort; they've been trying to do more of those recently. What remains of it sits on a cracked china plate between them, its glossy brown top reflecting back light from a flickering candle on the windowsill. James is halfway asleep, cheek rested against his own shoulder, neck aching. He can hear, in the quiet, his own throat protesting his breath. Remus has long-since stopped trying to initiate conversation.

There are the three rhythmic knocks on the door and then two more. The code echoes in the quiet. Remus gets to his feet, face twisted with anxiety.

"Stay here," he tells James.

James ignores him, clambering up too. He shuffles to the kitchen doorway and grapples a hand around the frame.

Remus hovers at the front door ahead of him and opens it slowly, one hand twitching towards the blade James knows he has stashed in his back pocket, its outline a foreboding shape.

Outside, through the darkness loom three familiar figures. Sirius is at the front, slightly shorter than Lily but not by much. Archembeau towers behind them, dwarfing the younger hunters, their bounty slung over their shoulders. All four are in dark robes.

Sirius smiles weakly. He's got a bruise around his eye. "The last thing you said to me was to bring you something when I got back," he says before Remus can prompt it.

"And did you?" Remus asks.

Sirius pulls out the hollowed shell of a mollusc. Silver and black and grey in distended loops. It shines slightly in the light from the kitchen; he pushes it into Remus' hand like a coin.

"I got one for James too," Sirius says. He peers past Remus inside. "Prongs."

"Pads." James grins despite himself. "Don't stand on ceremony."

Sirius shuffles past the threshold. Lily and Archembeau don't follow.

"We were going to invite you both in for—" James starts

"We can't hang around," Lily cuts in, looking harried. "Sorry. Portofino's finally made contact with that coven in Greece, it's sort of hectic— the hunt ran long anyway, they'll want me back."

"I need to brew," Archembeau says simply.

"We made cake," Remus offers, crestfallen.

Lily's harried face morphs a bit, rippling between shades of exhausted. She forces a smile anyway. "Next time," she promises, and darts inside for a moment to give Remus a hug, arms around his middle, his around her neck. James hobbles over and worms his way into the embrace, feeling out of place, though they grab him and pull him in as if afraid to let him go, so it's probably just in his head. Lily and Remus have felt like something he can't intrude on since—since they all separated, really. For a lot of reasons. He's considered himself to be out of place in most rooms for months now, though, so maybe that's what it is. He feels undiagnosable and sort of floaty and like he's not really here. They let go of him after a few seconds and James thinks he might drift out of his body like smoke from tar.

Archembeau clears their throat. They put out an arm and Lily takes it, stepping out again, shaved head disappearing beneath her hood.

"Next week," Archembeau tells Sirius simply. "Rest. Be ready."

"Right," mutters Sirius. "Bye, Lily. Bye, Claude."

With a sharp crack, Archembeau and Lily disappear. They leave a deafening, leeching silence in their wake.

James kicks the door closed and the sound is final.

"Well," Remus says. "We left some cake for you, anyway."

"I'm not hungry," replies Sirius, in that voice he uses when trying to appear as if he isn't paying attention. He shucks

his boots and jacket off and his hands and arms are scuffed and bruised. He stares at them.

James slings an arm around his shoulders and drags him into the kitchen anyway. "Sit," he instructs. "Did you sleep at all?"

"We were on the pack's trail all night," Sirius yawns. Obediently, he takes a seat beside James, folding his legs on the chair. "Christ, I'm tired. It's cold. Hey, I told you, I'm not hungry."

"I don't care," James retorts. He shoves what's left of the cake at Sirius and puts a fork into his hand. "Just try."

Remus slides into his seat opposite them both and ducks his head into his hands, rubbing his eyes with the pads of his fingers. James wraps his feet around Remus' ankles and this time, neither of them pulls away.

Obediently, Sirius takes a few slow, contemplative mouthfuls of the loaf. "It's good," he mumbles.

"We made it for you," James says, feeling a sort of sickening relief; it almost brings nausea it's so strong.

"I mean, I made it for all of us," mutters Remus.

"You remembered I like cranberries," Sirius says with mild delight.

James grins at the table. "Remus did. It was his idea mostly. Wanted to cheer you up."

Remus kicks him under the table. He's not smiling. James shuts his mouth.

Sirius pushes through all that's left of the loaf in savouring bites, shoulders tight with exhaustion. James catalogues him, trying to pick apart unblemished skin from that which has been torn at by brambles and claws. He and Archembeau and Lily have been hunting for hodag for weeks now. Trying to kill enough that their horns can be used in the potions Archembeau is brewing to save those Kettered. Evidently, it could be going better. But James supposes it could be going worse, too.

"Has Lily been alright?" he asks, for lack of much else to say.

Sirius swallows a mouthful. "We don't talk much," he says simply. "She seems alright. Just tired. Being based in Portofino is wearing her out."

"I'll get her to stay one of these nights," chips in Remus. "When things let up a little."

Things probably won't let up anytime soon. But that doesn't need saying.

Sirius pushes the empty plate away. He scrubs a hand back through his hair, raking his fingernails across his scalp. James watches his face relax, some of the lines of tension melting from it. Remus seems to go a little less stiff too, shuffling down in his chair slightly, sharp, rigid spine melting into his familiar slouch.

"So," James puts in, feeling that now is probably the best time. "Yí'ān's been in contact. He wants me in Poland tomorrow."

Sirius whips his head around to stare at him. Remus' chin slips out of his hand and he makes a garbled, confused sound.

“What?” Sirius asks. “On your own? No. No, we’re not doing that.”

“It’s a pending distress call,” James explains quickly, “and nobody’s answered it, since nobody wants to go east of Krakow right now, and since he’s still not fully healed, nobody will take him out there—”

“You need me to apparate you,” Sirius cuts in. “I’ll come with you.”

“What’s the big deal about me going alone?”

Remus and Sirius exchange glances.

“Oh, stop it,” mutters James.

“It’s a legitimate concern!” Sirius exclaims. “You can barely walk most days—”

“That’s an exaggeration. I’m getting better all the time!”

“Distress calls are dangerous, you need to be able to run. And you can’t run.”

“I can literally turn into a deer,” James defends. “The call is out to a forest, it’s twenty miles out of Lublin, if I need to get out of there, I can do it easily. It’s one call. And he wants me to go alone because apparently whoever called in sounded... young.” He shifts uncomfortably. “It’s probably a kid come up from Slovakia. There’s no danger to that.”

“I agree with Sirius,” Remus volunteers, unprompted.

“For once,” James says lowly.

“This isn’t about—” Sirius waves his hands around frustratedly. Hand, really. His bad arm flops a bit but

doesn't rise higher than the edge of the table. It sags when they fight, as if it doesn't have the will to participate. James has yet to make even an inch of headway towards figuring out how it works. "James, that's a bad idea."

"Don't you trust Yí'ān?" James defends. "It's his plan, not mine."

"Of course I—" Sirius frowns heavily. "Jamie, I just got you back. You're already running around trying to— to— and you can't start taking distress calls. I can't lose you again."

"*You* just got *me* back?" James demands, a bit indignantly.

"Let's not do this," Remus puts in, ruffling his hair out of his face. "I just want to sleep. Can we just sleep?" It was the moon less than a week ago. James abruptly feels like a terrible person.

Scowling, Sirius stands up. "I'm apparating over to Nanterre in the morning," he proclaims. "I'll try to reason with him."

"He's still on bedrest, mostly," James protests. "Don't bother him right now." He yanks out Yí'ān's comms book from his pocket. It's the same one he wrote in all those months ago to summon Sirius' allies to Little Hangleton. Almost a year ago now. It feels like centuries. "He contacted me through this. That means he's probably still... look, can you just stop making such a big deal of it?"

"I'm not making a—"

"You spend half your time hunting," James interrupts. "That's way more dangerous. So just... just let me do this. Alright?"

Sirius looks at Remus helplessly. Remus knuckles at his eyes tersely and then glances up at James, frowning.

“We’ve just been concerned,” he starts. “That maybe you’re... you’re...”

“I’m what?” James demands.

“Maybe you’re getting a bit... you might be moving too fast. That’s all.”

James blinks. “I spend half my time lounging around here,” he protests. “I’ve been sleeping about twelve hours a day.”

“And on the days you’re not here, you’re paying Keepers to bounce you around the continent trying to start up the delivery service again. We’ve seen the letters,” Sirius blurts out. Ripping the bandaid off.

It’s like someone has poured cold water over him. James feels sick.

“That’s not,” he starts, and stalls, “it’s not. It’s. That’s not what it is.”

“James,” murmurs Remus.

James stands up too, chair screeching. “I’m going to get some air,” he rasps.

“Jamie—” Sirius tries.

But James has already pushed his way out of the room. He clatters out of the front door and into the windswept grass, overgrown and dark, and he slams the door behind him. The ocean stretches to his left in a tumultuous mass like a lung. He stumbles down the dirt path to the cliffside and

sits in the spray. It isn't raining but it will be soon. He can taste it on the air.

Sirius isn't quite right, or James can tell himself he isn't, anyway. He isn't so much trying to start again as he's trying to make *something* useful of himself before he rots away. It's only been a handful of letters, too. A family in southern France writing to relatives in Saint Petersburg, trying to make it out of the death eaters' clutches. Parents in Britain and beyond, confused about the silence of their children when the letters stopped coming. Nothing substantial. Just enough to stop James from wishing he had done things differently that night on the roof of Hackney Terrace.

His face is wet and startlingly cold. Feeling stupid, James wipes at it frustratedly. Neither Remus nor Sirius comes out to get him, though he knows they'll wait up for him before they sleep. It's not often that he's the one to storm out. But most nights, it's at least one of them. At least the cake went down well, he thinks darkly. That's one win for this evening.

And he forgot to give Lily his letter. *Fuck.*

Later that night, they curl on the mattress side by side, Sirius in the middle as he always is. None of them brings up what happened. It doesn't feel worth it to kick back up whatever fight they left off on, or whatever one will come next.

"I just," Remus says to the ceiling in the dark, all of them breathing uneven. "I thought things would get better straight away, I guess. And I know that's stupid. But I still thought it."

Wind lashes the window. Their small makeshift bedroom is cramped and narrow, with an uneven floor. The mattress is from Kolka. It has more springs broken than whole, and it's always freezing, no matter how many blankets they all pile under and how close together they sleep, which isn't very close tonight anyway.

Sirius is the first to reply. Between them, he takes up very little space. James still marvels at how his presence has changed since he knew him before. How much less air he consumes in any room.

"I thought so too," he confesses. "But I'm still glad we're here."

"I didn't say I wasn't. I just said it's hard."

"Well, it is."

"Yeah."

James wraps his legs around one of Sirius'. He takes the cursed hand in his and swaddles it in blankets. It stays cold as death between his fingers but he doesn't let it go. "It'll get easier once all this is over," he says, not believing it much.

"All this," prompts Sirius.

"You know."

They all know. But part of the problem, and James is aware of this too, is that this — all this, the war, the nightmares — is most of what each of them is at this point. Individually and together. After this, James isn't sure what they'll do. Dig their own graves maybe. There won't be much of them left to bury.

Sirius rests against his shoulder. Even his breath is cold. He hums and says nothing.

"You're still going tomorrow?" Remus asks.

"If you let me," James replies, somewhat snappishly.

Sirius grunts softly. "Can we not argue anymore tonight?"

"As long as you agree to let me go."

"I'm not going to stop you." He hesitates. "Just let me be the one to take you down there. Okay?"

James nods slowly. "Let me do the job on my own," he parries. *Let me feel like I've done something right.*

A small pause. "Okay," Sirius murmurs.

Remus laughs; James isn't sure whether the sound is contemptuous or not. "And I'll stay home and make the food," he scoffs.

"I guess you will," James agrees.

"You're lucky I—" He cuts himself off suddenly. "You're lucky it was just the full," he amends after a moment. "We should sleep."

Sirius nods against James' arm. His good hand skitters across the top of his chest, feeling the break as if to check if it's still there, or maybe to check if it's gotten any worse.

"The next time we go to Nanterre," he mutters. "I'm getting someone to look at that. At this." He touches it again.

"I think they've got enough on their hands," James protests.

Remus groans faintly. "What did we just say about fighting?"

James rolls closer on the bed. Whether to feel closeness or just to prove he's still mobile, he isn't sure. "Goodnight," he mutters into someone. Sirius, but it might as well be Remus. They're composed of each other. He wouldn't be surprised if they shared DNA.

"Goodnight," Remus mutters. James feels his long-fingered hand touch his forehead lightly in the way you might close a dead body's eyes.

"G'night," mutters Sirius, followed by something in a language he didn't know before he left. Norwegian or some shit. James doesn't ask what it means. He doesn't think he's supposed to.

Dorcas,

Did you get my last letter? Christ, I hope so. I gave it to one of the Dublin-based Keepers and he promised to run it over to Nanterre for you but I don't know whether he was messing with me. There was nothing that important in there, I guess I just hoped you'd gotten it.

Anyway, in case you didn't, I'm doing alright for the most part. Breathing is easier. The guilt is getting to the point where it feels like it won't kill me. Or if it will, it will be slow. Which is worse but I can't think about the future right now. So consider me a-okay.

I've been trying to figure out a way forwards. I can hear you already at that. Angry or laughing. Probably both. It's stupid. And I know it's stupid. So you don't have to tell me. But. That's where I'm at right now. I talk to Yí'ān a lot; he

got me a job in Poland today. He seems to know I'm a bit antsy. Guess the guy has experience with fucked up teenagers. But after that's over, I know I'll be thinking of letters again. Thinking of them and still doing very little. Not enough. I run a handful back and forth every few days and I've been trying to find parents. But it's not much. Not enough to get me noticed.

I guess I'm afraid of what people would say. The Order. The boys— my boys. That's corny but it's what they are. They're sort of onto me, or they think they are. We haven't talked about it yet. Did you tell them about...? About... you know. Those few months. Did you? Because they're worried. I don't blame them but it feels stupid. If we should be worried about anyone, it's Sirius. Remus deserves it more than me, too. He hasn't talked once about Hungary or the Wolves. I don't even know what happened there.

Then again, none of us are really talking about anything. So maybe I'm complaining about nothing. Maybe it's better this way. I think I'd like to talk. That's a lie, I wouldn't like it. But it might help. But neither of them seems to want to be the one to start it and I don't either so. That's that for now.

I've barely asked you about yourself have I? Sorry. I hope you're okay? Nanterre sounds hectic. But by the rate Sirius and Archembeau and Lily are hunting, it shouldn't be too long until they start rolling out cures. That's something! Give Mary my love always. I tried to write to Yí'ān to see if he's seen you but he said he hasn't. Try to give him a visit if you can? That curse was nasty. I don't know him too well but I know he feels like shit right now. And we both know a lot about feeling like shit.

I love you! We'll see each other soon. Hopefully. Wish me luck in Poland.

Yours,

James Potter.

"It's not as many as I'd thought," Remus says when James walks into the bedroom that afternoon, looking for his jacket.

James startles. Remus is sitting cross-legged on the floor with the handful of letters James has collected since the dissolve spread out on the floor in front of him.

"I didn't give you permission to look at those," he says half-heartedly. "Have you seen my jacket, Moony?"

"It's on the back of one of the chairs in the kitchen," Remus says, thumbing through the letters. He glances up at James through his hair. "You're heading out?"

"Sirius is waiting for me," James confirms. He hesitates in the doorway.

Remus holds up one of them. "This one's for Hogwarts. These too."

"They're from, uh, some parents I tracked down." James hesitates. "I had to explain myself. I promised I'd deliver them as soon as I can."

"Which won't be for a long time."

He shrugs. "If the opportunity arises, I—"

"James."

James raises his hands in surrender. "I had to— I had to make amends," he tries. "They've been in the dark for months. And I had to say something. Okay?"

"You're torturing yourself."

"I'm trying to fix the mess I made—"

"More unsent letters isn't fixing it, James!" Remus snaps, uncharacteristically harsh.

James swallows back a hard knot of grief in his throat. "I know it's not," he croaks. "I just need to start somewhere."

"You have to tell Sirius. Tell me. We'll help you. You can't do this on your own."

"Well, I have been since you left," James says, knowing even as he says it that he doesn't mean it.

"And look how well that went," Remus replies tiredly. He shuffles to his feet, leaving the letters in a pile on the floor. Less than a dozen of them. They still make James sick to look at.

James can't meet his gaze. "I have to go," he says. "Sirius is waiting."

"James." Remus catches him by the wrist. "You know we can't stay like this forever. Not talking. Not... not anything. I love you both more than life itself but we just can't."

"I know." James pulls away. "I'm trying to get through to him."

"It's not just him."

James steps back over the threshold. "I have to go. See you later, Moony."

"You—"

But James has already turned away. He crosses the landing and pounds down the narrow, rickety stairs. The house is about the size of postage stamp and he reaches Sirius in five seconds flat, standing in the hallway with his boxy arms folded.

"Sorry," James mutters. He grabs his jacket from the kitchen — not really his, but it has become his over time; none of them own anything that purely belongs to them anymore. "I'm good to go."

Sirius nods tersely. He shuffles James out of the door and into the cold, biting wind. The sky is a blister above them, the colour and texture of mould as early evening draws in.

"Hold onto me," he mutters. And James holds onto him.

A moment later, they crash onto the hard, snowy ground, a world away. The whole sky constricts and then lurches back to normal size, darker further east. Polish air smells less like the ocean than Latvian. There is the iron tang of nearby industry, almost like blood, probably just as cannibalistic. Sirius lets go of his arm and then takes it again, a sort of muscle-memory movement.

James blinks a few times to adjust to the light. They've landed on a narrow, uncordoned one-lane road through a patch of thinning foliage. Ahead lies more dense forest; behind them, more road, leading out across miles of mudflats.

“You’re sure you got the right coordinates?” he murmurs to Sirius.

Sirius squeezes the inside of his elbow. “Pretty sure,” he confirms, glancing around surreptitiously. “I’m still not the best at this— but yeah. I think so.”

“Then that’s where it came from.” James points outwards towards the forest ahead.

Wind whistles by, a haunting sound. It feels like the world has been all ghosts recently. James has seen only the harried faces of those few parents he has tracked down and the Keepers; and Remus and Sirius, Lily, Archembeau; that’s been all. If there was a sense of unity to the resistance before, it’s gone now. There might as well not be anyone left at all.

The grey and rust-red landscape seems to vibrate. It’s a mirage, cast at odd angles by sheets of broken ice and by the melting snow frozen back into strange shapes as night sets in.

Sirius tugs at him. “C’mon. Let’s go.”

“I want to do this alone,” James protests, though he feels less sure now. “You said I could do this alone.”

“I meant it. But.”

“But.”

They glance at the forest and then at each other again.

James is the first to break. “Stay behind me.”

"I always do," Sirius jokes, which is patently a lie. Neither of them draws attention to it.

James lets go of him. He considers transforming but isn't entirely sure what that would do to his chest. At his side, as if reading his mind, Sirius' back quakes and he sinks to the ground in a fluid motion. The black hound whuffs at James' knees, licking his ankle.

Above, a bird caws loudly, a cutting sound. Feeling unsettled, James leans down to scratch Sirius behind the ears. He starts off towards the dark mass of pine trees ahead, the dog tight to his side. They crunch through the snow together. The air is clear out here, though the cold makes his sternum ache. It makes everything ache. He wishes he had brought Remus.

They reach the treeline. Sirius hesitates there, whining. James crouches beside him and presses his forehead to Sirius' doggy snout, knees drawn up against his chest. He keeps his feet firm on the ground; he isn't sure he could get back up if he sat.

"It's just a distress call," he murmurs. "It's probably nothing. You used to do these all the time, right?"

If dogs could look skeptical, Sirius would probably look skeptical right now. Instead he chews on James' ear.

James bats him off. He stands, steadying himself against a tree. Sirius weaves between his ankles and then trots off into the darkness ahead, trampling brambles, snapping at birds. James has no choice but to follow.

It's a consuming darkness inside. The pine trees are tall and bulbous, locking most of the light out. James makes it a few

minutes inside, Sirius returning to pad along beside him, before he starts calling out.

“Hello?!” he shouts into the dark nothing. There is no echo, not even the woody reverberations a forest should yield. Just his own voice folding back to him. “Can anybody hear me?! We got your call!”

Sirius barks once. They both go quiet.

Nobody calls back.

“Can you smell anything?” James asks.

Sirius looks up at him, whuffing. Then, he darts off through the trees, presumably to see what he can find.

James presses on through the forest, shouting out still, shouting until his throat burns like fire. He’s sure that at every turn, behind every tree, he will stumble over a body. He’s seen enough bodies in this war that he’s sure he wouldn’t even have to check its pulse. He would just know.

As the sky through the branches above turns black, Sirius comes back to him. James didn’t doubt that he would, but he still lets the huge dog jump up and rest its paws against his shoulders, morphing in a handful of liquid moments into Sirius, whose hands find his clavicle, legs distending until he’s taller than James again.

“I got something,” he pants, “but it’s a dead end. Tails off towards the east of the forest. Buried by the snow. But there was definitely someone in here a few days ago.”

James frowns. “Any blood? Any magic?”

“They set off the distress signal somehow,” Sirius shrugs. “Maybe met another wizard or... if they’re not British....”

He detects something in that. “You think they’re British, though.”

“The smell’s sort of familiar.” Sirius shrugs once, looking slightly uncomfortable. He pushes a hand through his hair. “I can’t place it, it’s too old. It’s barely there. But I know one thing.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” He gives James a long look. “Whoever it is, they’re sick. I can smell it. Hypothermia or frostbite or something. Dead cells. It fucking stinks.”

“Dogs can smell that shit?” James asks, shuddering.

Sirius looks away with a mildly pained expression. “We should go. There’s nothing here.”

“You’re sure...?”

The quiet is poison. Sirius nods once. Feeling like it’s the best thing to do, James pulls him into a tight hug. They sway in the ice and the nettles together, wind pushing through the trees. Sirius’ hair has got leaves caught in it. James resolves himself to get Lily over to cut it sometime, or else to try it himself.

“Sorry,” mutters Sirius into his shoulder. “Just feels like everything’s all fucked up.”

“It’s okay.”

"No, it's not." James expects him to let go but he grips tighter still; he thinks he couldn't get out of the hug if he wanted to, which he doesn't. "You don't know how long it was... it." A pause like ripped stitches. "It was you. You and him. You don't know how many nights there were when that was the only thing that kept me here."

"Pads..."

"I don't want to make you sad," Sirius says quickly, "I just need to. Say it. Somehow. It's you. And him. It's always been you and him. And it's stupid, 'cos we were fifteen when I left, but I guess I'd thought it would be easy. And you'd both be the same. And I'd be the same. But I feel like a stranger in my own head most days."

"It'll get better," James murmurs. "I have to believe it'll get better."

"Will it, though?"

"People change fast. A year ago I was..." *Happier. Not dying.* "Different. You're not... stuck."

"I feel stuck," mutters Sirius. He puts a hand on the back of James' head and feels his hair and feels his throat. They've always had a physical closeness, the two of them, a congruity. Even now, Sirius is sort of like a second body. James is sure that even when they're on different continents, their hearts beat the same.

"Well you're not," he promises. "And if you are then we'll unstick you."

Sirius laughs hoarsely. "If I get stuck again?"

"Then we'll do it again."

The swaying has gotten sort of rhythmic. It's halfway to a dance. Sirius shuffles in a slow circle and doesn't take his head off James' shoulder.

"Shit," he mutters.

"I know."

"You know I still dream he'll find us. Every single night."

"I know," James whispers.

"And that'll probably never go away."

"Not even when we kill him?"

"If."

"When."

Sirius hesitates. "When. But no. Not even then."

"That's okay," James says, trying to make it seem okay in his head; and of course it's okay. But the idea of it is a sort of unending massacre of a life. He's wondered whether the war will ever end for years now, but the idea that they might never find peace — that they'll live and live until they're grey and still feel like this — is sort of worse than even the idea of dying young.

"It's not, really."

"It's not," he agrees solemnly. "But I'll still be there."

Sirius pulls away first. James lets him, knowing he shouldn't cling. He feels like a bird tamer around his loved ones sometimes; since Hackney Terrace, since Kolka. Each person he's lost feels like a place he can't go back to. He

fancies himself a lion trainer. Holding a wild thing and hoping it won't bite to get away.

Empathy, an old voice in his head whispers. Being around Sirius again makes James feel like a little kid. He wants to flunk a Charms test and break rules. He wants to make mistakes that don't matter. He wants to go back and change a million things. The wanting is a hideous thing. It makes him feel rotten.

But Sirius doesn't disappear from before him. He stands there, as solid as a statue. He watches James' face with an attentiveness he didn't have before. But he's still him. They will have to make that enough.

"You'll still be there," murmurs Sirius. He forces a smile. "Let's go home?"

"We could stay out here for a while."

"I don't want to get eaten by a bear."

"There are bears?!"

"Dunno. But we would probably find out the hard way."

James cracks up. "Let's go home," he agrees, feeling giddy. "Before Remus frets."

"As if Remus frets the most of all of us."

"Apologies. That's you."

"You're not great yourself." Sirius kicks him lightly in the back of the knee.

James staggers into a tree, catching himself with his hands. "Dickhead," he mutters. "Apparate us out of here?"

“Let’s get out of the forest first,” Sirius offers.

“Okay. Stay a person this time, though. You stink as a dog, you lick me all over my face, I’ll have to shower. And our shower barely works.”

Sirius leans over and licks his cheek as a human and it’s sort of gross; James shoves his face away, snorting, face hurting with the force of his smile. They start back the way they came. Snow has begun to fall softly once more, flakes dusting down through the trees. It makes everything seem slightly brighter.

There probably aren’t bears in the forest, James thinks, feeling comforted by it. It’s quiet enough that it might as well just be them and the birds.

By the time they reach the road again, his feet ache. Being stuck in Hackney Terrace for months made James shit at getting out of bed most days, let alone walking, but he likes to think he’s building an endurance, if it works like that.

“Are you going to ask, then?” Sirius asks, as they step from the trees.

James startles. “Ask what?”

“About how it’s coming along.”

“Oh.” Frankly, James had almost forgotten, if forgetting such a thing is possible. “I’d sort of assumed it was, like. A thing between you and Remus.”

Sirius shrugs. “Well, it’s not going well.”

“Oh. Shit.”

He digs into his pocket and pulls out something that catches the light. The locket. James has seen it a handful of times. He's never asked but from what he's heard from Remus, Sirius and Claude got it in the springtime. It's one of Riddle's *somethings*. He still doesn't know the word.

"The diary you found on Amelie, too," Sirius mutters.

"Still not... not been able to make a dent in 'em?"

"We're getting there. I need to find Dzintara, but she's scattered to the winds." Sirius tucks the locket back into his pocket, frowning hard.

"We'll get there," James promises. "Maybe I can go at them with my bat. I want something to hit."

"You don't mean that."

"I think a good fight would make me feel better." Sirius didn't see him on the train in September. And James is glad for it. He barely remembers that day, only the animal rage of it and the sight of Peter's arms stretching from the train window after them, there and gone.

Sirius nods, not seeming to want to pry. Or maybe he just knows it's some big, untouchable thing that lies outside of the jurisdiction of their unspoken rules. He comes to a stop in the road and sticks a hand out. Snow has caught in his hair and his eyebrows, along his shoulders. A flake melts on the tip of his nose.

"Ready?" he asks.

James takes it. He closes his eyes and lets Sirius take him home.

Chapter End Notes

- [Official Tumblr](#)
- [Twitter Quotes Bot](#) (admin: [lupinlesbian](#))
- [Pinterest Board](#) (admin: [plantfeline](#))
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BARANOVICH

Chapter Notes

LOTS TO SAY HERE LISTEN UP

first of all: over the last few days, this fic has had a significant spike in readership! all i can say is wow and thank you so much! if you're enjoying, i really appreciate comments, any feedback truly means the world - this fic has picked up a bit of traction on various socials recently, but if you were wondering whether to drop a comment on your way out, jpds still generally gets the same level of feedback it did before almost doubling in readership, which is a bit of a shame, but obviously i'm still very happy! regardless, what i'm saying is if you like it, please do let me know :> i'm shit at responding to comments but i read every single one and they have a huge positive impact on my creative and personal life. if you've ever commented, i see you and love you mwah mwah mwah

secondly: there have been some AMAZING fanworks made for this fic recently that i am SO THRILLED with. genuinely blown away cannot find the words to express my gratitude <3 please go show them some love! you can find them [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#). :]

on top of this, the wonderful dan lupinlesbian (twit) has put together a [jpds quotes bot](#)! please go check it out! i have notifs on for it it's like. the best thing in my life rn. endless gratitude crying real tears etc.

one last thing! my personal tumblr was deactivated a while ago for various reasons, BUT i have just set up a

jpds-specific tumblr for updates, art and asks! you can find it [here](#)!

okay i think that's all! i am kissing u . enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

A shape in the sky above the ridges of the distant mountains catches Sirius' gaze. He stares at it for a while, blinking slowly. He's got his arms folded on the cracked fence around the outside of their small house, and the ocean sits like a gummy gem to his left; he fucked up his eye on the last hunt and blinking makes strange colours jump around in his vision, and the whole mass of dark water seems to flash with some concealed light, rushing up from the depths, fish or submarines. But there's nothing out there. Muggle trade through the North Sea is stalling. Muggle trade most places is stalling.

The shape swoops and dives, wings folded. It shoots out of sight and into the trees. A bird of prey, hunting rats. There is little to scavenge for out here this time of year. Sirius knows; he has been locked into a territorial sort of frenzy as of late, not feeling human. There is always the urge to hunt and protect. But it's in the animal way that makes each moment feel like a blind shoving thing -- there is no honor nor righteousness. Only the cruel, constant awareness of the thickness of his teeth in his mouth.

"You can't keep doing this," Remus says from the doorway. James hasn't woken yet. It's still early.

Sirius doesn't turn around. He's got a headache growing right between his eyes and a hot pain spreading down his spine. He feels full of jumping electricity.

Remus wanders up to stand beside him. He's too small for his trousers now, after everything that he's been through over the past few months, and his belt has made them wrinkle up around the waist. His cardigan has gone fuzzy and bitty around the sleeves with age. He rests his elbow against Sirius' and stands there with him in the quiet.

"I know," Sirius replies eventually, because he has to, because he does.

"Then stay with us today."

"I can't."

Remus eyes him. "You can," he says, as if it's that easy.

Sirius shrugs. He's in a black canvas jacket he took from Claude what feels like a million years ago. It feels like a tent and a boundary wall. A security blanket. He ducks his hands into the sleeves and tries to feel human. He draws in a breath and holds it.

"They'll be here soon," he says lamely.

"Archembeau adores you," rebukes Remus. "I see how they talk to you. They would let you take a day off. Stay."

"If I stay too long, you know what'll happen."

A short, bitter laugh. "No, I don't. Sirius, this might come as a surprise, but..."

"But what?"

"But I can't read your mind like I used to." Remus bumps their ankles together, watching the treeline with a heavy expression. "Not anymore."

That's one of the hardest things Sirius has had to hear since they got here. Almost as hard as James saying, on the first night, *I can't tell you how many times I thought I would do it. Pads, I can't count them all.*

"I'm afraid," Sirius says, feeling stalled and weak and sort of like language no longer obeys him. These days he doesn't think in English, only in pain and instinct. "I'm afraid that if we spend too long together, I'm going to have to talk about it. And Remus, I can't talk about it. Look at me. I *can't*."

"At some point we're going to have to talk about it," Remus replies, exhausted. "We can't stay like this forever. You've seen him. You think he can keep this up? You think *you* can?"

"If that's what you think, that's why I'm leaving."

"But you'll always come back."

Sirius does not have a good track record when it comes to staying anywhere, let alone with people he loves. Remus knows that. They all know it. His betrayal (if that's the right word; James would say it isn't, Remus would say it is) is a heavy, unspoken burden that sleeps in their bed with them every night.

"I'll come back," Sirius concedes, not stopping to consider whether he means it. "Listen, Moons. Go back inside. Okay? He'll be up soon. I don't want him to wake up on his own. Christ."

Remus reaches over to take his hand, his bad hand, which Sirius has hefted to rest atop the wood. They stand at the fence together with their cold fingers tangled for a while.

Wind rushes in off the coast. Sirius wishes he had seen Remus' home. He wishes he had stayed there. James told him the other day, in broken phrases, about the summer after fifth. Breadmaking and summer sunshine. The catatonic trauma that followed the Rosier wedding. Remus' camp bed. They have both written Sirius more letters than he can even think about without feeling ill. He doesn't think he'll ever be able to sit and read them without wanting to off himself. So he's trying not to remember that they exist too often. Someone has stowed them away in a cupboard in the kitchen and that is where they have stayed.

"He'll be sad that you didn't say goodbye," Remus offers.

"He's got you."

Remus laughs. It isn't a real laugh. It's more like a retch. "Being here," he grits out, "it, you-- you make me feel like we're fourteen again. Standing here talking about him. And I don't even mind."

He takes his hand away and leaves Sirius feeling cold all over.

"All we did was worry about you," Remus tells him. "For two years. There wasn't a day or an hour it wasn't about you."

"Remus--"

Remus raises a hand to stop him talking. "I'm not angry at you," he chokes out. "I'm not angry at him. Don't look at me with that face. You make me feel like... like..."

Sirius looks away. He isn't sure what face Remus means and doesn't want to ask. Fear, maybe. Memory. "Sorry."

"It's fine." A frustrated noise. "I just... I can't explain it. You make it impossible to say it right. Both of you. But I'm trying to think of a way we can fix this. Sirius. Padfoot. I'm trying. You don't know how hard I'm trying."

"And?" Sirius asks, with his breath caught in his throat.

"And I don't know if I can do it on my own." Remus steps away. With the ocean behind him, he looks one with it. The wind threads through his hair and he's blue and grey, a miasma. He's a million colours he shouldn't be. He's the saddest thing in Latvia.

Sirius turns back to the trees. "I'm trying too," he offers. It is not enough.

"I know you are." His cold hand lands on Sirius' shoulder. "Try harder. Stay with me. Us."

There's a sharp crack across the rippling grass. A tall, dark-clothed figure straightens up, one with the sharp rocks. Claude turns to stare over at the shack, fifty feet away. Sirius can't see their expression but he can imagine their raised eyebrow into existence even from here. Their midnight blue skirt has small, bright flowers sewn into it, cutting off halfway down their calves, buffeting in the wind. They might as well have appeared from another world.

And Sirius can't stay. He can't.

Remus seems to know the moment the decision is made. Maybe he can still read his mind after all. He steps away and doesn't say another word. Sirius watches him disappear into the house; he doesn't slam the door, closing it quietly so as not to wake their third. Kind, painfully so, even then.

Claude crosses the grass twenty feet, cutting through the grey-green, a dark slash in a watercolour painting. They raise their voice to call over the wind. "Ready to go?"

Sirius clammers over the fence and jogs to their side. He feels weak at the knees. He feels like torn metal. "Yeah," he pants, reaching them.

They slap a large hand down onto his shoulder and squeeze. "The Welsh one?"

"Staying with James."

"Mm." A bemused pause. "Lily has been worried about you."

"I'm fine." Sirius straightens up. "Making amends, remember?"

Claude gives him an appreciative look. The hand tightens and the earth disappears from beneath Sirius; he is pulled into suffocating, drowning emptiness. He spins and lurches, feeling his hair whip around his face. He hits the ground on the balls of both feet and doesn't stumble, only striding out into the alleyway at Claude's side.

The dawn sky over Portofino is orange and peach, purple at the edges and over the ocean. The bay is pearly blue at the mouth of the sidestreet. Sirius has been here a handful of times and knows where to go. Still, he falls into step half a foot behind his mentor, glancing around.

The muggles are already up; before the water stretches a square of cobblestone and dust, hazy with morning mist, and past the pier lie rows of bobbing white fishing boats with their sails folded like wings. There's a spun-sugar smell on the air like a bakery. A man loads bags of flower through

the doorway of a bottega on the other side of the square with its awning halfway lifted, being hauled up on a rope pulley by a young boy. Everything is pale in the golden light of morning. Birds chirp in the trees and through the ivy scattered across the sides of buildings. High, green hills stretch up on either side of the valley, and at their foot lie terracotta-coloured flutes, each apartment one window wide, washing lines slung between them, sheets blowing in the wind there.

Claude leads him down the square, chatting idly to the man with the bags of flower as they pass in a steady, lilting stream of Italian. Sirius has never asked them how many languages they speak and has settled on a relatively sure answer: too many. They told him once that they used to live in Italy, for a few years during their teens after they left the for-hire cursebreaking business. Apparently the sixties were a hard time to keep that sort of thing up.

The buildings curl around a lazy bend where they meet the water's edge, leading north along the shore. With their heavy hunting boots cracking against the stone, Claude and Sirius take the turn and ahead lies a sharp incline up a scraggly mound of hillside for forty or fifty feet, edged with jagged, rocky cliffside that presses against the water, greenery hanging in clumps off the edge.

"Why," Sirius asks, feeling duped, "do you always apparate us *before* this bit?"

"I like to keep you well-trained," Claude defends, snorting. "*Crois en toi, petit chien!*" They take off jogging towards the hill.

"*Petit chien,*" mutters Sirius. He glances around surreptitiously and, taking a deep breath, shifts, feeling all

the bones in his body click like maracas or tectonic plates. His jaw grinds out of place and his arms distend; there's the uncomfortable feeling of fur, and of his clothes melting into his skin; the ground lurches upwards towards Sirius and he bounds ahead, barking, claws clicking down against the stone. He canters ahead with an easy, rolling stride and snaps at the back of Claude's ankles, who roars and speeds up; they race each other up the hill, neck-and-neck, until Sirius pulls ahead at the last moment, scoring up to the grassy stretch along the top of the incline, where he cocks a leg to the side and pretends to piss on the floor.

Claude kicks him lightly. "Cheater," they admonish, forehead shining with sweat. They're grinning. Sirius gets the impression it's not all about training after all. "Come."

Sirius barks again and, tail wagging, sticks close to Claude's leg as the two of them clamber along the hillside, the ocean roaring below. There is no path up here so muggles rarely take this trail, and only fifty feet along the way lies a heavy weave of repellant charms to keep any stragglers away. Sunlight cuts in stark sheets across the grass and the rocks, sliced by passing clouds, reflected up against the stone from the water, which seems to glow.

"You seem in high spirits," Claude comments absently, crunching through a thicket of nettles. They walk closest to the edge and they don't look down at their path once. There's a superhuman surety there.

Sirius barks, feeling stubborn. He's not changing back.

They glance down at him. "Are things better with your...?" They seem not to know the right word in English. Or in any language.

Feeling slighted, Sirius snaps his jaws at a bird swooping overhead. It lunges out of reach and dips over the cliffside towards the ocean.

"I will take that as a no." Claude reaches down to scratch him behind the ears. "These things take time. Keep at it. But keep at it while you're there. Out here, concentrate."

Sirius bites their ankle. They barely seem to notice.

Things have been like this between them since the Sanctuary fell. Amicable but... strange. Detached. Sirius knows it's his own fault (after all, he's got enough to make up for that it's started to feel like a grave to fill), but it doesn't make it any easier that they hardly hug anymore. He misses it but doesn't know whether he's allowed to instigate it on his own.

They pass through the wards and Sirius feels his ears pop. Claude pulls to a stop and waits for him to turn back. Sirius growls in the back of his throat and then changes obediently, rising to his full height and shaking out his hair.

"It's far too long," Claude mutters. "Has nobody cut it for you? Here."

They spin him around at the shoulders and rake Sirius' hair back into a tie. Sirius allows it, feeling mollycoddled. "It's not that much longer than yours."

"I am far better at hunting than you," Claude contends, deft fingers pulling hair through elastic. They yank it into something resembling a ponytail, Sirius' scalp straining. It's a bit lumpy but that's fine.

"I'm better than Lily," Sirius contends, insulted.

“Shh.” They spin him back around and examine him. “It’ll be a short one this time. I expect we’ll hunt through the night and get you back to Latvia by morning.”

Sirius panics. “Oh. Are you sure? I can stay longer.”

Claude looks unimpressed. “If I needed you, I’d keep you,” they say dryly. “Unfortunately, I don’t need much more hodgepodge before I’m ready to brew this batch. You’re due some time off.”

Time off sounds like the last thing Sirius needs right now. “I could brew with you. You’ll need an assistant.”

“Evans has already taken that role. She’s the one interested in potions, I thought.”

“Well, yeah, but. But. She’s busier than me.”

Claude sighs. “You’re going back to Latvia,” they say, and it’s final. “For a while. Just a while. Now come. The day’s getting away from us already.”

They descend down the other side of the hill together in relative silence, Sirius feeling cowed. Ahead stretches the Castagna, spread across the abandoned bay where the cliffs give way to pale sand and thick, untamed greenery, paled by the sun, almost the colour of tundra. Tents are scattered like broken machinery across the half-mile expanse, their canopies layered with canvas for concealment, charmed to keep out the cold. Tiny golden lights float through the veins of dirt that weave through the fabric village, fireflies at a distance, magical up close. Like clotted blood, dragon skins have been spread out at the mouth of the shore where tangled grasses give way to white pebbles, soaking up the sun, stolen from a death eater stronghold two weeks ago by a handful of insurgents from Prague. The Keepers are

planning to use them for armour and potions, apparently, once they're drained of blood and saltwater.

Sirius has been to Nanterre less times than he has fingers on one hand, and most of them have been to see Yí'ān or to deliver letters from James to Dorcas a couple of times at the end of December. Nanterre is the new domain of healers and the sick; it's almost as much a graveyard as it is a hospital. But there are none of those afflicted in Portofino. This is the home of generals and soldiers. The war lives everywhere now, but it sleeps here, in northern Italy with the Ligurian Sea a blue promise across the horizon.

Claude strides into the canvas maze, Sirius a smaller shadow at their back. Hazy light fades through the fabric walls at their sides and ripples across the earth. They cut across the dirt past the commanders' tent, where Neumann and McGonagall and half a dozen others are probably already holed up, discussing how best to deal with the death eater presence growing in west Berlin, which began on New Years' Eve and has only gotten worse since. Wizards, witches and sorcerers are already up and about too, in clumps on the ground outside their tents, eating out-of-season melograno and barley out of tin dishes and mugs. Most look war-hardened and tired. There are a little over three hundred living out here, only those able and willing to fight. Refugees and insurgents. The revolutionaries Galina used to talk about. Sirius feels young whenever he comes here.

Ahead, a figure winds between two crossed tentpoles and clambers over a blackberry thicket, running in their direction. Lily kicks up a bit of sand as she jogs and it hangs on the air behind her, thin and dusty. She's already in her gear; she must have shaved her head again recently. She's

got a hard look on her face and a purple-green splotch at the corner of her mouth. She reaches them.

"You look like shit," Sirius greets.

"So do you," Lily replies, looking far too tired to argue with him.

Claude gestures to her swollen mouth. "Did you win?"

"Just some... French guy," she grimaces, and paws at the bruise as if to wipe it off. "Being English is understandably unpopular around here. It's fine."

"I can get him back for you, if you want," Sirius offers, a sort of olive branch.

Lily laughs at him. "I could get him back myself, if I wanted to."

"Come." Claude puts his hands on both of their shoulders. "We cannot afford to stay and chat."

Sirius knows such acutely. He and James and Remus were shunted off to Latvia for a reason. Staying anywhere where he might be recognised for very long is dangerous, for himself and for everyone else. He nods once.

Lily takes his arm. She doesn't initiate contact often. Maybe she's finally softening up to him.

Portofino vanishes.

By nightfall, they plod together along the banks of a river with no name in central Belarus, fifty miles south of Baranovich. It's empty out here, only grasslands and

swamp for miles, and the spill stretches into the heart of a miles-wide forest, running north towards a lake downstream. The sky is pure, unbroken black. There isn't enough light to illuminate the clouds; the earth rescinds like a bowl beneath a darkness thick and cavernous as a round pupil. It's eerie and very still. Snow covers the ground but it stopped falling hours ago, when they lost the pack's trail further south. Apparition is impossible. The sound of it would reveal their location.

The rotted brown spinal cord of what was once a wooden groyne stretches along the edge of the black water. Weeds have grown through it, prying the oak flesh apart. Grass hangs low over the edge, its ends in the water. The sound of the stream is mostly clicks and ripples, broken sheets of ice sweeping across its surface. They follow the wind. They follow the tide. They do not speak.

Lily sticks tight to Sirius' side. A few feet ahead, Claude presses through the overgrown grass, impossibly silent. If Sirius didn't know better, he would think they existed under a constant silencing charm. But they don't need magic for this. Their knife gleams across their back, one of the only bright things in the world.

Sirius has his knife out, gripped in his good hand. His other arm lies at his side, ready. Lily's got a blade in her hand too. Occasionally, she reaches over to clink its metal edge against Sirius', as if to confirm that they're both still here.

At a stolen moment in the middle of the night, she turns to look at him. Sirius, in stride with her and almost sharing elbows at this point, meets her gaze. She raises her eyebrows. Not knowing what she wants from him, he looks away, then looks back. There's a stolen second of intimacy. Her face, poorly lit, says, *we're in this together*.

Ahead, Claude pulls to a stop. Sirius and Lily both walk squarely into their huge back, stumbling. The three hunters stand dead still. Waiting.

Sirius peers into the darkness ahead. Nothing moves out there. There is only the water and the trees, and on the far horizon, the silent flash of distant lightning, so small it might as well be a flare of electricity in some faraway town, a growing fire, burning up through a house.

Claude turns very slowly to look over their shoulder. They nod once and then they disappear.

The crack is fierce in the quiet, and it echoes like a gunshot. There is a sudden commotion down the bank. Dark masses burst from the grass in a stampede, rising from where they had been nesting, keening and snarling as they dart away from the noise.

There is another sharp bang. Claude's dark form reappears further down the riverside, on the herd's other side. Corraling them back to Sirius and Lily.

Sirius flips his knife in his hand; he and Lily burst forth into the overgrowth as one. They streak into the nettles and cut through them, twin knives. The lumbering black shapes of the beasts they're hunting charge at them. Hodag are easier to hunt than porlock. They're less of a pain to find and larger, too, making them less slippery.

Unfortunately, they also have far larger teeth.

Sirius picks apart the streaking, heavy-footed shape male in the grass to his left. He rips to the side and hurls himself at it-- he pictures James' face in his head and remembers the sound of his voice-- his hand rises and its fingers crackle with light, casting the grass into a flaming glow around him.

There is the hissing, reverberating growl of magic. The hodag claws at the earth to find purchase there, to turn and roar at him, huge tusks gleaming white and sharp. It's covered in tufty grey fur, its coat thick, and its red eyes and red tongue stab through the dark, lashing. Angry crimson blurs.

Protect me, Sirius thinks, and presses his hand forwards in front of him like a canon; there is a bright, loud prayer in it. Heat fizzles from his fingertips and lances forwards in a snapping, snarling whip. It's blinding and it smells electric. Tendrils of white-hot magic lash across the hodag's scruffy jaw and send it scattering, screeching and whining with blood dripping from the coarse black flesh.

Ten feet behind Sirius, he hears Lily shout out. He whips around and catches sight of her launching to the side, inches from being ripped in half by a snarling female, whose longer, serpentine form boasts a spiked tail that, as Sirius watches, whips out behind it and catches her in the leg, sending her staggering towards the water's edge.

"NO!" Sirius hears himself shout, and heat that seems to have birthed itself in the joint of his wrist explodes from under his skin in a searing burst of light, catching a stripe of grass at his feet on fire. The flame illuminates the shapes of fleeing hodag all around, their dark flanks disappearing towards the forest to the east. *Not so fast.*

He makes a split-second decision. Sirius turns to the fire and sweeps his hand across its surface, prising it from the earth into a ball that hovers before him. He casts blindly out in front of him, thinking only of the taste of lips on his -- someone's, he isn't sure whose, and perhaps it's only love itself he holds any primal affection for -- and the fireball

launches into the mass of black bodies and scatters them apart, screeching, some falling.

Another scream. Sirius whips around and hurtles through the grass to Lily, birds rising from the bushes at his feet and swirling around him to the sky in a harking hurricane; he sweeps to her side, finds her in the blackness. She is bleeding and he is throwing her arm over his back. Her leg is almost in two.

"I'm fine," Lily grits out. Her face is bloody but her knife is bloodier. "I'm good, let go of me."

"Do not let go of her," Claude instructs, barrelling past and full-body tackling the hodag Lily managed to injure, which has clambered to its feet and started advancing. They take it to the ground and with a huge arm, they snap its neck cleanly, sweeping to their feet in one rolling movement and sprinting off into the darkness, towards the burning shapes of writhing creatures through the grass.

Sirius lowers Lily to the ground, rolling her trouser leg up. They sit in the snow together, leant against one another like scaffolding.

"I killed a handful," he says. "They'll get a few more. I think it might be enough."

Lily's face is grey and very tense. She gasps out when Sirius touches the wound, which yields a long, horizontal sliver of white bone all around the shin and halfway around the muscle. It's ugly but she's probably dealt with far worse. Merlin knows Sirius has.

"I got two babies," she grunts, pointing through the grass to the still shapes of twin hodag calves. "That's why the mother was pissed."

Sirius is impressed. "You're getting better."

"Yeah, well. Not fast enough." Lily sits upright, still propped up against him. "They might need help."

"When have they ever needed help?"

"They needed us," points out Lily.

Sirius shrugs. "If you can stand up right now, be my guest," he says.

And Lily knows as well as he does that she can't, so she doesn't. She isn't James, who would have tried anyway, nor is she Remus, who probably wouldn't have asked in the first place. Sirius sees them in everything on nights like this. In the dead hodag calves ten feet away, in the distant fire, in the bone and muscle and blood.

Claude hobbles back through the grass to them, two huge beasts slung over their shoulders, almost as long as they are tall. Dead and bleeding from the mouths. They drop them to the ground and crouch beside their protégés.

"You are very lucky," they tell Lily flatly, "they are not poisonous. Leg out for me. That's it."

Lily stretches out her knee straight, grimacing. Sirius offers his hand to squeeze and she gives him a strange look and doesn't accept it.

"Hold still." Claude pulls out their wand and starts muttering. "Sirius, talk to her," they say in French, before ploughing on.

"Uh," Sirius says, feeling awkward. "How are things in Portofino, then?"

Face screwed up, Lily tips her chin up, glaring at the sky.
“Small talk? *Now?*”

“No time better than the present.”

“Oh, fuck you.” She heaves in a steadying breath. “They’re sort of shit, if I’m honest. And I guess I have to be honest. I’m regretting not taking Dorcas’ offer to go to Nanterre, take up healing. But it’s better in Portofino for me than anywhere else. Closer to the thick of things.” A pause. “When the situation changes, I want to be the first to know.”

There’s a steel in her voice that Sirius recognises from their days at Hogwarts. “How’s McGonagall?”

“Tired. Furious.”

“At you?”

“Most of the time.”

“Why?”

A tense shrug, a small grunt of pain. “This isn’t exactly soothing,” she snaps, before pressing on, “and yeah, I guess. The delivery service wasn’t just him. It was me and Remus too. And James fucked up worst, but we weren’t there to stop him.”

“The Order sent Remus away, though.”

“But they didn’t do the same to me. I left on my own.”

Sirius squints. “Why?”

Lily turns to look at him, with a look on her face like she thinks he’s stupid. “With James and Remus and I, it’s all of

us," she stresses, "or it's none of us. I think you understand that."

And Sirius does. He understands it better than she knows.

"Yeah," he murmurs. "Yeah, I guess."

They lapse into quiet. Lily's leg is halfway back together, Claude knitting the tendons into place with measured, firm hands, muttering an incantation that Sirius doesn't recognise. The fires have gone out and the black sky overhead blinks down at them all like a mirrored lake. As if at any moment, gravity will let it go and it will crash down over them all. Sirius has felt moments from drowning for months. He feels no further from it now than ever before.

Claude dumps them in a hotel room in Byelaazyorsk for the night with two twin beds. They confound the man behind the desk and shuffle the pair inside, Lily hovering at their arm, still shaking a bit from the adrenaline of the fight.

"If your leg is going to take on infection," they tell Lily strictly, dropping her onto one of the mattresses, "it'll be in the next few hours. Poisoning from hodag attacks is rare but unpleasant. I would rather catch it before it gets worse." They straighten up. "I am going back to Nanterre to brew. I'll stop by every hour or so to check on it."

Sirius almost asks, *why do you need me here?* but figures this is Claude's way of congratulating him on a hunt well done. Getting him out of going back to Kolka for a few hours.

"Okay," Lily grumbles, seeming to know she can't change their mind. She lies back against the flat, yellowing pillows

and closes her eyes. In the dim light, she's sallow and veiny.

Claude nods to Sirius once. They rub a hand over the top of his head; Sirius thinks it's with affection, but then they pry their hand through the elastic tie and pull it out of his hair, slipping it onto their wrist. They step out of the room and close the door. There's a crack outside and they're gone.

"Shit," Lily murmurs into the ensuing silence.

Sirius ruffles his hands through his hair to pull out the tangles. He lies back on his own bed and stares at the ceiling. Neither of them speaks for a while. The tiny city is quiet outside.

"James has told me a bit about Lambeth," Sirius offers, feeling awkward. "He misses those days."

Lily doesn't open her eyes or move. Sirius thinks for a while that she's fallen asleep. Finally, she sighs. "I think we all miss those days."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I mean. It was awful." She hesitates. "Because of you. I don't think either of them slept half as much as they should have. Spent all their time writing to you."

Sirius' heart hurts. "Oh."

"But it was the best thing I've had since I left home," Lily continues, "and I love James like he's a second head. He's... I don't know. The only person in the world I think I would willingly die for. I had nightmares every night at Rostock and in every one, he didn't make it."

"You hated him when I knew you last."

“And of the two of us, who do you think changed?”

Sirius sits upright. “He’s sadder now,” he says in a rush. “I don’t think I really knew how much worse things had gotten until I was with him again. Mary, I guess. Mary made me start to wonder.”

“Yeah?” Lily asks flatly.

“I didn’t really know her at Hogwarts. But I knew she was kind.” Sirius sees her sunken face behind his eyes and pushes back the urge to rub at them. “And the Mary I knew in Reykjavik wasn’t... she was kind, but she wasn’t the same. A part of it was the kettering, but--”

Lily sits bolt upright. “Say that again.”

Sirius stares at her. “Uh,” he tries, “she was kind, but she wasn’t the same.”

“The next bit.”

“A part of it was the kettering.”

She watches him intently for five, six seconds, probably more. The silence stretches. Her eyes burn into Sirius but they’re out of focus. Her mind is evidently miles away, spinning rapidly.

“The kettering,” she repeats slowly. “You mean the *graben*?”

Sirius has heard it called that a handful of times in Nanterre and Portofino alike. He’s heard *Lily* call it that. That’s what the healers in Rostock named it. Somehow, the original got lost in translation; Yī’ān only knew its first name

because of his brief contact with the Order that fateful August night he brought Mary home.

"It's called the kettering curse," Sirius says, confused, feeling like he's said something wrong. "That's its name. The one that... eats you. Why?"

Lily stares at him. "I didn't know," she says weakly. "I... you're sure. Kettering with a 'k'?"

"Yeah." Sirius slides off his bed and sits beside Lily on her own. "What's going on?"

She looks ill. "That's the name of the town I grew up in," she says. "I grew up in Kettering."

Sirius raises an eyebrow. "It's probably a coincidence," he starts.

"No." Lily shakes her head firmly. "No, it's not."

"...Explain?"

"'Ketter' isn't a verb," she rushes out, sounding panicked now. "It doesn't mean anything. It's a town, that's it. That's the only place it could've gotten that name from."

Sirius still doesn't really get it. "It's probably nothing to worry about," he tries. "Maybe a death eater or something just comes from there... I mean... there's no point getting upset." *Please don't get upset. I can't handle that.*

"I'm fine," snaps Lily. "I'm not-- I'm not upset. I'm just frustrated. And confused."

She stands up and goes to pace; her leg gives out. Sirius rises to help her and she shoves him off, determinedly

pacing onwards anyway, limping heavily and holding onto the radiator.

Sirius sits back down. "Nobody told you it was called that?"

"Nobody calls it that. Out here, it's *graben*. I've heard Slovaks call it *kopanie*. That's it."

"Right, well," says Sirius, "to the death eaters, it's the kettering curse. That's the name they gave it. Yí'ān told me."

"Fuck."

"I think you're jumping to conclusions, seriously. It's probably nothing."

"I'd rather jump to conclusions than stay in the dark," Lily snaps. She slips again and heaves herself up, face taut with pain. She stands on wobbling legs like a fawn in the winter.

Sirius stands up again. He crosses the bed to her, hands up in front of him.

"I think you should sit down," he implores. "Just-- for a bit. You're all fucked up."

Looking very indignant, Lily lets him guide her to the bedside, where she sits on the grotty quilt and stares out of the window, jaw twitching. Sirius sits beside her. They melt into a tense quiet. It's obvious that Lily is thinking very hard.

Sirius wishes James or Remus were here. They know her far, far better than he does — and both of them are better with people than him by miles regardless of that. They would know what to do. All he can do is sit here, tense as a

coiled spring, and wait. For violence or confusion or something else horrible and familiar. Sometimes strangers make him feel like this. Tense and uncertain, like he's standing on very thin ice over dark water. That's Tom's work. And Lily is far from a stranger, but he struggles to call her a friend.

"Okay," Lily murmurs eventually. She turns to look at Sirius. "I need you to do something for me."

Sirius blinks. "Anything," he says. "Uh. Well. Anything I'm capable of." Which isn't a whole lot, but he can still make the offer.

She clears her throat. "Take me to Kettering," she demands. "Please."

"Kettering." Sirius feels his hands go cold and then his chest. It's a sweeping, anxious pain. It sits in the bottom of his throat like a shackle around his neck. "In Britain."

"It's in the Midlands. Nowhere near London."

"Lily—"

"Please," she says, and her voice cracks. "Claude will say no, I know them. I just— I just need to see. I just need to know."

Sirius feels sick. He shuffles away from her to sit on the end of the bed, not wanting to be touched by anybody.

"I can't," he says lowly. "I'm sorry. You'll have to find someone else. Someone in Portofino—"

"None of them trust me!"

“Then in Nanterre.”

“They’re too busy out there to sleep, let alone ferry me around.” Lily doesn’t grab his arm, but her hand hovers over it as if she wants to. “Sirius, please. I need to see. I just need to make sure— it’s family. It’s about family.”

Sirius knows one thing about family, and it’s that he’s going to be running from what his family did to him for the rest of his life. Family is not a pleasant word. It’s a bad taste and a bruise, a battering. It hurts like sickness in the bones.

“I’m sorry,” he says again, voice constricted, throat small as a chestnut. “I can’t go back to Britain.”

Lily scrambles off the bed and limps around to crouch in front of him. Her big, light eyes lance him in the dark.

“You already did,” she murmurs. “Look what you did the night of the fall. You got James. You got Dorcas. You were brave, Sirius.”

Sirius has never heard her voice so soft. Lily Evans is many things, most of them undiscovered, like islands or bones. She is not gentle.

“I... I don’t even know where Kettering is,” he says weakly.

“I can tell you the coordinates. That’ll be enough.”

“You know the coordinates?”

A startlingly hard look. “I don’t take chances.”

Sirius clears his throat, trying to press the lump out of it. He feels trapped between Lily and his own spine, boxed in.

The whole world is claustrophobic. He wishes Claude had left the light on.

"You promise me it won't be long?" he asks, after a very long moment. "You promise."

"Of course," Lily says immediately. "We can leave a note for Claude, honestly— we can tell them we went for a walk. It'll be an hour at most. I promise. Sirius, please. Be brave."

"Stop it." It's Sirius' turn to muster a hard look. "Stop doing that. I'm not stupid, Evans." *I've been manipulated enough in my life to see it.*

Lily has the decency to look cowed by that. She tears her gaze away from him and looks at the floor. "Sorry."

"It's fine." Sirius squares his shoulders. "Okay. I'll do it."

Her shoulders relax. "What will I owe you?"

He gives her a strange look. "I don't take debts," he says."

"Everything is debt," Lily contends, sounding far older than her seventeen years. Eighteen now. They missed her birthday.

"Do you owe James and Remus one, then?"

"No. That's different."

"I'm them," Sirius says, mildly uncomfortably, still trying to inject some pride into the words. "I mean that it's not just them anymore. It's me too. We're... we're the same. No matter what they're doing. If they owed you, I'd owe you too. So there'll be no debt. Okay?"

Lily shakes her head, looking sort of amused at that. “Even after all this,” she says, “your self-preservation is lacking.”

Sirius stands up. “I guess it is,” he agrees.

Claude,

*We went out for a walk for a bit to get Lily back on her feet!
We're fine, no need to come look for us. Will come get you
if anything happens. :)*

— *Sirius.*

Sirius is bad at apparating within coordinates. He's done it twice in his life and both times, Yí'ān was there to coach. He's pretty proud of himself for getting within a mile of the town, which glows faintly further up the two-lane road from where he and Lily land, masked in heavy darkness and tall bushes. Fields stretch out for miles on either side of them. It will be hours until dawn reaches Britain.

Deftly, he lets go of Lily's arm, turns around, kneels down in the middle of the road and throws up.

“Oh, fuck.” Lily crouches down beside him and pulls his hair out of his face. “I didn't think the journey was that bumpy.”

“It's not that.” Sirius retches again, feeling the whole world spin around him; the sky lurches, he feels barely human, he feels like if nausea was a person. There are hands all over him, phantom touches, hairline fractures in every bone. For a searing moment, he thinks he'd rather die than stay here. He can hear *his* voice. He can hear it. He can hear it and hear it in his head like saints or sirens.

“Oh.” Lily’s still touching his hair. Sirius wants to tell her to get off but he can’t around the bile in his mouth. She sits beside him and crowds into his space. “Are you having a panic attack? That was a stupid question. Shit.”

Of course I am, Sirius wants to shout. Instead, he falls clumsily out of his crouch and halfway to the ground on his side, panting and heaving. Every shadow around them could be him. Maybe he’s found a way to detect Sirius passing the border. Maybe he’s been watching him this whole time. Maybe this isn’t Lily Evans at all; he whips around to stare at her, searching her face for the melt and decay of polyjuice.

Lily stares back at him wide-eyed. She drops her hands. “Tell me what I can do to help,” she says weakly.

Sirius sits back, shoving his hands over his face. He forces himself to breathe. He digs his teeth into the flesh of his palms and bites until he feels it creak and twitch and tear.

“No-- no, don’t do that.” Lily reaches out to take his wrists, very gently this time. She pulls his hands away and holds them in hers. “Sirius. Look at me. It’s fine. You’re fine.”

“I don’t get it,” Sirius rasps, squeezing his eyes shut. “I was fine. I was *fine*.” He made it through London, the red hell, the underworld. He made it that night and survived until he could collapse with James in Kolka. He clawed his way from the grave then. Why can’t he now?

“There was a lot going on,” Lily murmurs. She sounds distraught. Probably feels guilty for pushing him into this. *Good*.

Sirius pulls his hands out of hers and presses them against the cracked concrete beneath him, feeling it against his

palms, against the pads of his fingers. He tries to sink into it. He wants to be buried here.

"I'm okay," he croaks. "I'm okay." He certainly doesn't feel okay, but saying it makes it real, or that's what he tells himself. "Just give me a minute."

Lily's hands disappear. Sirius closes his eyes and leans his face forwards, feeling the cold against his cheeks. He feels like a dog about to be put down. There is Tom's face behind his eyes, laughing at him, leering.

A wasp buzzes nearby. The hands reappear behind Sirius and begin trying to wrangle his hair. Plaiting it, Sirius realises after a moment. He wants to shove her off and leave her here. He wants to bite something and pull it apart. But he takes a steadying breath and lets it happen. He rides the waves of panic and tries not to drown.

Lily finishes, tying the end with a band. She touches Sirius' shoulder. "Are you feeling better now?"

He can breathe again. That's something. "I guess," Sirius bleats. "I guess, yeah."

"We can go back if you want."

"No." He claws at his face, rubbing his eyes and the tops of his cheeks. He pushes his nails through his scalp and pulls himself from the ground in a sharp, rapid movement that makes his head spin. "No. Come on. Let's get this over with."

Startled, Lily stares at him from the ground. "Sirius..."

"You told me to be brave, didn't you?!"

“But if it’s going to hurt you—”

“I’m fine,” Sirius snaps. “And I don’t want to talk about it. Come on.”

A live wire, a lighter with a leak, Sirius starts off down the road towards the distant lights, tracing the dashed white line. Britain has a particular smell to it. Peat, agriculture, iron. The death of possibility. Home. He hates it almost as much as he hates most things these days.

Lily pulls herself to her feet behind him. She jogs to catch up and reaches his side, wisely not touching him again. They walk in silence, not looking at each other.

The plait is nice. Sirius touches it a bit when he feels calmer, when he feels less like his hands will shake or he’ll cry or something stupid. He wishes he had the headspace or time to do his hair more often.

“James and Remus want you to come over sometime,” he says, breaking the quiet. “For haircuts.”

Lily turns and blinks at him. It’s clearly not what she expected him to say. “Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“Well. Of course I can.”

“Really?”

“I’m busy. But I can make time.” There’s something she’s not saying tagged onto the end of that: she can make time if it’s for them.

Sirius nods awkwardly. "We'll set a date. Remus will cook. James will dote on you."

Lily snorts. "I'll dote on James first. He's not winning that game."

Despite himself, Sirius laughs very slightly, the sound a rattle. It makes him feel lightheaded and strange and he has to stop for a while and stand in the middle of the road clutching at his chest and trying to stay upright.

"Fuck," he croaks. "I fucking hate this."

"I know," Lily says. "I know."

"It was simpler in that fucking cellar." Feeling crazed, Sirius laughs, a hollow sound. "Don't you dare tell either of them I said that. Christ. Remus would cry."

Lily doesn't reply to that. When Sirius musters the strength to look at her, she's peering at him, a very sad look on her face.

"I won't tell them," she murmurs. "You should've seen James after that day."

"I know. He told me."

"I don't think he's ever been the same."

Sirius shakes his head. "Nothing about him is the same. Let alone that."

"...The three of you. It's not going well?"

"I suppose it's not," Sirius admits stiffly. "But if I keep trying to talk about my feelings, Lily Evans, I'm going to go fucking vegetative. So we should get to your old house. Okay?"

He starts off again, pounding his working fist against his chest. Lily falls into step beside him and doesn't press. She's got sense. She always has. Sirius is glad that out of anyone, it's her that has brought him here. He wouldn't want anybody else to see him like this. Whether they would feel sorry for him or think him weak, he would hate it. But she will do neither. That's worth something.

They reach the outskirts of the town; the long road turns off into a cramped, greying suburb, small terraced houses crunched together along a street without pavements. It hasn't snowed in Britain but it must have rained recently; some of the drains set into the concrete have been lifted from their places and set to the side. Clearly they keep getting clogged and nobody has paid to have them replaced.

"Welcome to Kettering," Lily says shakily. "I grew up here."

Sirius grew up in a shitty area, but not in a house half as small as these. He sticks to her side like glue and they begin up the silent road. Almost none of the houses have cars in front of them. There's no danger of being hit by a driver.

"Midlands," Sirius jokes. "I wouldn't have guessed."

"Was the accent not a giveaway?"

"I guess I'm bad at picking up on them. I didn't know Remus was Welsh until he told me."

"Wow."

"I was a bit insufferable at that age anyway. I think he hated me for a while."

Lily shakes her head, scuffing the pavement with the toe of her boot. "I don't think he ever hated you," she says, as if it's that simple.

Sirius doesn't try to argue. It's too messy and he's too tired. They make a strange pair, the two of them, in their hunting gear and with their tired eyes. It feels strange to have returned from a war to a place so mundane. It feels like another world entirely.

Lily leads him up the road half a mile, past more identical houses. It's horribly silent; no lights are on. A power cut maybe. There might as well not be anybody living here at all. They pass a boarded-up convenience shop with its sign torn off. It feels apocalyptic. Sirius is sure if he stays much longer his lungs will shrivel and he'll stop taking in air.

When she pulls them to a stop, it's in front of a terraced house like any other. Lily stops and stares at it, jaw hard, eyes harder. She doesn't approach it. She just looks.

It's well-kept. The tiny strip of grass out front is trimmed and the windows are clean. Inside, all the curtains are drawn.

"That's where your family lives?" Sirius murmurs.

"Yes," mutters Lily. "Yes, it is." Still, she doesn't move.

Sirius remembers what Claude told him earlier. He should keep her talking. "Who did you grow up with?"

"Two parents and my sister." She shrugs once, a heavy motion, as if dragged down by more gravity than usual. "Tuney's probably moved out, though." She shudders. "We didn't get along."

Sirius thinks of Regulus. Regulus, still probably cooped up in Durmstrang. Regulus, eating fear more than he ate food, as if it was what he was born to digest. Soft and malleable. Whatever you wanted him to be.

"Me too," he whispers.

Lily doesn't turn to look at him. Her gaze upon the house has turned wistful. She looks bone-breakingly tired.

"I wish sometimes that I had never left," she murmurs. "It was a sudden decision. To cut all my hair off. To help with Padfoot's Army. To move out to Wales. And they decided to go to London and I didn't even stop to consider it. I just went with them."

"I'm glad you did. If that means anything."

"It doesn't mean much," Lily admits. "But thanks, I guess."

"What would you have done? If you'd stayed here."

A beat. "I would've had to run eventually. But I don't think they would've come after my family. I'm not important enough." She laughs huskily. "I never gave them a reason why. Just upped and left."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It's over now." She looks at him. "You're not sorry at all."

"I'm not," Sirius admits. "You're better without them."

Lily looks like she wants to correct him on that but seems to conclude that there isn't much point. She turns to look back at the house.

“Well,” she says quietly. “I know they’re still alive now. That’s something.”

“I guess it is,” Sirius agrees. “Tell me what you’re thinking.”

“You don’t know me well enough to ask for that yet.”

“Well, I guess I’m breaking the rules.”

Lily kicks him in the ankle, though it isn’t hard. She sweeps a hand over her face.

“I don’t know yet,” she offers him eventually. “I need time to think. Time to... consider stuff. I need to make a fucking mind map or some shit. I don’t know.”

Despite himself, Sirius laughs. “But you got what you came for?”

“For now.”

“You can’t make me come back here again.”

She peers at him. “You’ll have to eventually, you know. I’ve got this horrible feeling and I think I’m right about it. A feeling that everything’s going to end up coming back to London.” She huffs through her nose. A laugh or a sound of annoyance, Sirius can’t tell. “I don’t think I ever really left. I don’t think any of us did.”

“Lily—”

“I don’t want to freak you out. Just think on it. Okay?”

“I think you’ve got a lot more to think about than me tonight,” Sirius replies. He pushes a smile onto his face and tries to really mean it. It’s an exercise in futility but these

days, arguably everything is. "The second you've got a theory, you should tell me. I'm smarter than James and Remus."

"You don't actually think that."

"Course I don't." He holds out an arm. "We should go."

Suddenly, there's a sharp sound across the street. Sirius whips around and his foot catches on one of the bars of the Evans residence's front garden fence; he slips and cracks to the floor on his knees, pain flowering there. For a split second, his vision goes black.

"Sirius!" Lily hauls him up, pushes him behind her. She stands between him and the sound. "Keep it together--"

But he can't breathe. Sirius claws blindly at his throat and reaches out for Lily's shoulder, fumbling a hand around it-- in the shadows he sees faces, laughing faces-- there's a band like gunfire, apparition, and he doesn't realise that he has lifted them from the ground and from Britain itself until they are miles deep into the vein of the ether, darkness thick around them, colours and light flashing in the void and shrinking into a cruel, small singularity.

They land in the street outside the hotel. Sirius collapses against its red brick wall and breathes and breathes so rapidly that he isn't sure any of it is going in.

"Shit!" Lily shouts nearby. "I didn't see what it was-- shit, Sirius."

Clutching his chest, sure that he's bleeding, Sirius shakes his head. "I'm okay," he gasps. "I'm okay. Give me a minute. I'm okay."

She shuffles across the concrete to his side. Sirius thinks she'll try to take his hands but instead she peers at his knees, prying open the torn fabric there.

"It's just grazes," she murmurs. "You're okay. I swear, it was probably just a fox."

"I know." But he doesn't know. He doesn't know anything. It could have been death eaters tracking them, tracing them here. It could have been Tom himself, waiting for him. It could have been a spy. It could be the might of the Dark Lord's forces in their full fury, they could be coming here right now. They could arrive at any moment. Sirius remembers, in bursts, pain as unholy as anything that has ever existed—he remembers the feeling of bones loose in muscle, no longer locked together, joints shattered. He remembers Tom's smile. His shape like a flickering flame over the water.

Lily doesn't try to shake him out of it. She just sits at his side until Sirius is back in his own body, arm close to his, not touching it. Nobody comes to stop them. It's too late for anybody to be out. It's just them and the black sky, still black even now, with dawn approaching over western Europe. She doesn't take his hand, but Sirius gets the impression that if she could, she would.

There are no birds awake yet. If it's morning, the world has been born asleep. Christ, Sirius feels hardly human, he feels like one word could snap him and he'd come apart. There's that horrible hot wet tension between his eyes that tells him he might cry. And he can't cry. He refuses to. Not tonight and not any night.

When he's finally able to use his voice again, he asks, "Did you see anything?"

“Nothing,” Lily says. Then, as if sensing what he’s thinking, “I wouldn’t lie about this. I’m not Remus. I didn’t see anything, Sirius.”

Sirius stares at the dark road ahead, feeling empty, feeling like a husk of himself. He opens his mouth and closes it again. He wants to sleep. He wants to sleep. He wants to sleep more than he has ever wanted anything.

“I’m going to kill Riddle,” mutters Lily. She hovers a hand over his arm. “Can I touch you?”

“We don’t fucking know each other,” snaps Sirius.

“Is that a no?”

“Of course it’s not.”

She touches his arm, his bad one, the blackened skin still bright with strange light at the core. Her warm hand curls all the way around it. Sirius feels very small and sort of like she could break him in half. She gives that impression to most people, he thinks. An eternal, unknowing sort of control. He understands at that moment why James and Remus love her so much.

“You’re alright,” she murmurs. “I know it doesn’t feel that way. But you’re alright.”

“It feels pointless,” Sirius starts, “it all feels pointless, because he’ll kill me in the end anyway—”

“Sirius.” Lily squeezes gently. “Saying it won’t make it feel better. Not this.”

It’s surprisingly wise. Sirius wants to say it, though. He wants to never stop saying it. He feels like an angry child,

chided by elders.

"I'm tired," he says plainly, instead. "I want to go back to Kolka."

"That's a win." Lily offers a hand to pull him to his feet. "Come on. We need to see Claude first."

They trek up to the hotel room in awkward silence. Sirius sort of wishes he could ask Lily to keep holding onto him. She isn't a comfort but she's sort of built like a crutch. She feels like she could single-handedly hold him in one piece. But he's not about to ask for that and she's not about to offer it, so they stick a few feet apart the whole way up.

Inside their tiny room, there is a dark shape silhouetted against the window.

"Shit," Lily says.

Claude turns around. Even in the dim light, Sirius can see the very exasperated look on their face.

"We didn't go anywhere dangerous," Sirius says quickly, even though he's still bleeding and probably looks like he's been dragged backwards through a hedge.

"We're fine," Lily agrees, despite probably not looking much better.

Claude raises both hands to silence them. "I do not care where you've been sneaking off to," they say simply. "There's more important news than that."

Sirius steps forwards, heart in his throat. “Are James and Remus—”

“It is not them.”

“Thank fuck.” He slumps back against the door.

Claude steps forwards. Sirius realises then that they’re smiling. Not just smiling. Grinning.

“No time to rest,” they say. They hoist up from their side a familiar case; Sirius recognises it from the first time he met them. It’s full of vials. “We have two dozen doses of the graben cure to deliver to Nanterre. Quickly, now. Let’s get working.”

The three of them apparate to the outskirts of Nanterre and land in the middle of an empty green field, the settlement dark across a high row of underbrush ahead. The sky above is mottled and orange with the distant light of a city Sirius cannot see.

“*Fuck,*” says Lily, as if she can hardly believe it.

Claude pushes ahead through the tall grass. “Come!” they bark, and like ducklings, Sirius and Lily run after them through the knee-high greenery, Sirius holding Lily up as she limps still on her tender leg.

“Christ,” Sirius mutters. “And you’re sure you got it right?”

“I got it right before, no?” Claude calls over their shoulder. They have long strides and they’re very hard to keep up with, but neither of them complains. “I’ve got it right this time, too.”

Lily reaches out and grabs their arm. "It was a part of our deal," she says, "Mary. You would help Mary."

Claude doesn't turn to look at her. "I keep my promises," they say, and clamber through the bushes in a long, powerful motion, clawing through them with no regard for thorns or thickets.

Lily lets out an undignified noise. Half-excitement and half-shock. Sirius climbs through after her and before them sits the maze of stout concrete bunkers that make up Nanterre's insurgent medical facility. Hovering orange flames adorn the sky above the cluster, high and bright as angels.

It's less populous than Portofino, which itself is less populous than Dublin's stronghold. Nanterre houses a hundred and fifty of the sickly, maybe less, though the number grows more quickly than it falls. Half of them are victims of the kettering curse, which Sirius will never be able to say in his head now without thinking of Lily. The other half are victims of curses that are usually better but occasionally far worse.

Claude kneels and pops the case open. They hand one vial, glowing, to Sirius, putting it very gently into his hand and closing his fingers around it.

"I should not do this," they say. "However, nobody will stop me. *Aller*, Sirius. Lily, you're staying with me."

Sirius tucks the vial into his pocket and takes off running.

"Take care of her!" Lily shouts after him, drowned out by the sound of his heart pounding a fierce rhythm against his ribs.

Sirius runs until the world blurs, through clustered grey buildings and past gathered healers, pressing from their workstations into the night air to see what has triggered the wards. He runs until he forgets the pain in his knees and the fear, until he forgets the bile in his mouth. He doesn't stop until he has skidded to a halt before the door of Mary's ward, the smallest of the lot.

He doesn't hesitate; he takes the door handle and wrenches it open.

There's a sharp groan from inside. Someone -- Dorcas -- shouts, "Close the door! The light--"

Sirius doesn't give a shit. He hurtles into the blackness, accidentally knocking over a medicine trolley, tasting his pulse in his mouth. Someone shouts and there is a general outcry; there are less than half a dozen patients in here, but they probably don't appreciate the hubbub.

"Mary!" he shouts. "Mary, which one is your bed-- I can't fucking see, Christ."

"Sirius?" her familiar voice croaks from somewhere to his left. "Sirius, what's happening--"

Sirius feels his way to her side, hands outstretched in the blackness; he calls to her until he feels her papery face in his hands. He sinks to his knees at her side.

"Shit," he breathes. "Mary. Hi. I've got good news and bad news."

Mary wheezes. She doesn't even twitch beneath his fingers. Her voice doesn't sound anything like her own as she says, predictably, "I'll take the bad news first."

Sirius pulls the vial out; its glow seems to light up the whole room. Mary's aged face and Dorcas sitting wide-eyed at her bedside. "Your girlfriend isn't going to have an excuse to dote on you for much longer."

Dorcas lets out a shout, wordless and disbelieving. Mary doesn't move an inch. Her eyes find Sirius' and she seems too tired to even cry.

"Sirius," she rasps. "I love you. You're not funny."

Sirius laughs hysterically, feeling mad. "Dorcas, help me sit her up. Dorcas, quickly--"

Dorcas obliges with fluttering hands, devoid of her usual surety, lowering an arm around Mary's back with extraordinary tenderness. Sirius wishes, for a blind moment, to be touched like that. She raises Mary up to sit and Mary's eyes well up then, but it's not with emotion. Only with pain.

Sirius is going to end this. *We are not going to let Mary die*, Remus says in his mind. *I am keeping my promises to you*, Sirius wants to reply. *I am coming back to you. I am coming back to you*. There is a whisper of a feeling Sirius had almost forgotten existed in that liminal second.

Hope.

He unstoppers the vial and raises it to Mary's lips. Mary closes her eyes and she drinks.

Chapter End Notes

- [Official Tumblr](#)
- [Twitter Quotes Bot](#) (admin: [lupinlesbian](#))
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HUNGARY

Chapter Notes

hi hi hi chapter time this is sorta short but that is fine

new lupinlore/lupinlesbian art dropped [here](#)!! go check out their WONDERFUL take on mary my beloved. stunning beautiful etc

oh also, happy four month anniversary to this fic! :) it's been fun. like more than half of it has been a continuous manic episode i cannot claw my way out of but still. im vibing

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Jones,

So I know it's been a while.

I felt guilty at first, and I still sort of do, but you probably know why I stopped writing. So this is the obligatory bit, but: fuck you for all the stuff you lied about. Efa, too. Now that that's over with, I can say what I want to say.

How are you? I think about Britain a lot. I can't tell you where we're hiding right now, it's too risky, but I'm with someone who's just moved out of London and saw what it was like there. I was there a bit myself. The fire is like nothing I've ever seen in my life. It made me think of the mines. The coal and fury. Always inches from everything collapsing. Do you think of them these days? Do you think of me?

I guess a part of it was that I was stupid. I should have seen it coming from a mile away. A job to 'prove myself' — give me a break. There's no proof to be found or made in these times and I guess I should've put that together from the start. I guess it worked out in the end for both of us. Got me out of your way and... things aren't great for me right now, to be honest, Huw. Things are pretty terrible. But I've got hope. That's something I didn't have when I was in Merthyr. Sorry for being such a miserable bastard back then. And now, I suppose.

I've had some time to think and I think this is the conclusion I've landed at: I'm confused more than anything else. Confused and hurt. Confused about myself and Wales, and about magic and lycanthropy. About whether I'm more werewolf or wizard. Maybe the two cancel each other out and I count as neither now. That's certainly how people treat me. How you treated me, too, all of you. And I can't even blame you, because what else were you supposed to do?

I guess I've finally decided to write because I can't leave well-enough alone. Things are getting bad out here and I don't want to die without closure. Write back to me if you care. I'm going to borrow an owl from one of— I can't name names. Fuck. I'm borrowing an owl. He'll stay long enough for you to write back, if you ask him to. Sorry I can't give you an address. But can you blame me for not trusting you?

Write back, please.

Lupin.

Lupin,

Christ, you sound rough. Unfortunately, I doubt you're halfway as rough as I am right now, so you're going to have to sit through some whinging.

It's getting hot out here, mate. Hot and dark. There's more ash in the sky every day. We're moving north soon; wind keeps bringing heat and smoke from the east to Merthyr and it's made the air quality worse and worse, which is saying a lot considering where we live. It was hard to imagine it could get much worse, like.

Efa's stressed. Keeps snapping. Physically and metaphorically, I mean. So I'm not going to ask her about you, apologies, since I think it would make her feel worse and I'm not going to be the one to do that. She's already harried enough trying to find us land to move onto further north. There's another pack up there — smaller, but still. We don't want to kick them out, but we can't exactly coexist. None of this is important enough that you should worry yourself about it. We deal with shit like this all the time. It's just never been this high-stakes.

I'm not sure I can give you what you want, Remus. If it's an explanation, I don't have one for you. We don't trust wizards. We've been burned before and we don't want to be burned again, so it's nothing you did, mate, but that's the best reason I can give you. We needed you out of the way for a while and it worked. And sincerely, I'm glad you're okay. I mean that. But buggering hell, you cannot blame me for this. Your lot has hurt us more than you can know. And I get that that's not you, but it sort of is.

This war won't fix things for us, Lupin. Maybe your side wins and you go back to school or whatever. And you get a job and you live the rest of your life with your gay wizard friends. But out here, we don't have that option, we've

never had that option, and if you win, we stay the way we've always been. Alone and friendless and getting fucking kicked in the rocks over and over on all sides. You saw what it's like out here. So I get you being upset, I get it, and I wish it had been different, but I don't think we had another choice.

I'm not responding to any more letters. We move on from Merthyr soon. I grew up here and that's going away. And that's going to be a whole bloody thing, so I don't really have the time or patience to deal with this, I just don't have the space for it in my brain. I'm only writing back because I want you to know: you didn't do anything wrong, I don't think. Not personally anyway. We don't hate you or anything. This isn't like you pissed Efa off and she decided to be rid of you. She wanted to be rid of you from the moment you showed up, so it's less about who you are and more about what you are. Does that make it better or worse? I dunno. I guess you decide that.

I wish you luck. I do. If it means anything, I really liked you, Lupin. You seem like a good friend. I hope Black's alright.

Cheers,

Jones.

PS: Was Hungary pretty? I've never been. Nobody we've sent who came poking around has ever come back. They probably realised it was a lost cause. Now could you give up too?

Remus balls Huw's letter up in his hand and chucks it against the wall, hard. He shouts once, wordless and frustrated, and then plops into a chair at the kitchen table.

“Bad news?” James asks from the doorway.

He jumps, looking up. “You’re awake.”

“Yeah.” Shuffling inside, James takes a seat perpendicular to him. He’s in one of Sirius’ jackets and a pair of Remus’ pyjama pants. They’re too long for him and he’s rolled them up at the ankles. He looks fragile.

Remus feels awkward, like he’s been staring for too long. He glances away, out of the window, towards the bright ocean. “Is he doing okay?”

“As okay as can be expected.” James yawns long and wide. “Sleeping now. He was a bit... frazzled. Adrenaline and all that. I can’t believe Lily managed to convince him to go back to Britain.”

“If anyone could, it’d be her,” Remus says, and reaches out to tidy up James’ hair at the front, where it sticks up to the left at the spot he’s been lying on it.

“I guess so.” James hesitates. “The letter?”

“Huw.” Remus coughs, feeling awkward. “One of the wolves from Merthyr. He’s... I don’t think he wants anything to do with me anymore, to be honest. I don’t just think. I know.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.”

James shrugs. “Still. Were you two... friends?”

Remus remembers, in bursts, sitting with Huw as the dementors closed in. Crouched in the alleyway with every bad feeling he has ever encountered swirling in his chest

like blood in a drain. He remembers feeling a sense of belonging that was so tenuous that it wasn't really belonging at all. It felt more like looking into a mirror than stepping into a home. It was nothing that would ever last and all of it was illusory.

"Sort of," he says eventually, not wanting James to get the wrong idea. "We were sort of friends, yes. He's... a wolf. I don't know how else to describe it."

"I've never met another wolf." James rests his chin in his hands and watches Remus. "Are they all like you?"

"Depends what you define as 'like me'," Remus jokes.

"Cardigan-wearing. Bread-baking. Flighty. Tired. Tall."

"In that order?"

"In whatever order. All of them at once."

I wasn't baking bread when I left you, Remus wants to say, but doesn't. Instead, he reaches out to touch James' hair again. Just a small touch. He isn't sure he's allowed to, but James lets him. He leans into it. They sit palm to forehead for a while, the morning sun rising outside.

Sirius got home a few hours ago, rambling about Mary and a cure, about Kettering and Riddle. *Tom* and bones and the surety of capture. He didn't make much sense then and probably won't make much sense for the next few days. James and Remus will put up with it and put up with it, probably to the ends of the earth. They would put up with Sirius for the rest of their lives. Remus has begun to wonder lately whether he would keep caring even if neither of them wanted him to anymore. It isn't much of a question. Of course he would.

James stretches his arms up, up towards the ceiling. His gammy chest clicks loudly and obscenely. It's a conspicuous sound and it seems to rattle the house at its foundations. Remus pretends not to have heard it and James pretends not to know he's pretending.

"You look upset," James offers. What a fucking thing to say.

"Yeah, well," Remus replies, pressing the pads of his thumbs into his cheeks and feeling the bone, closer to the surface than it has been in years. Hungary hollowed him like marrow, like a husk heart. "I guess I am."

"Talk to me."

"There's not much to talk about."

"Find something." James' foot nudges his under the table.

"I thought you didn't want to talk," Remus says, with some animosity. "You told me you didn't want to."

"It's different when it's about you," defends James, potentially one of the worst excuses he's come up with for anything this year.

Remus sighs heavily. He won't win this one and he knows it. He rarely wins any of them. And he can't push too hard at James. His body won't let him.

"I'm just... not over it. I guess. What happened with the Wolves."

"Oh," says James.

"I don't want to talk about it."

"I mean, you can. I can listen."

“Yes, but I don’t want to,” emphasises Remus, feeling snappish and misunderstood. “It just ended badly and I was stupid, honestly, and that’s all it was. And anyway, I guess I just. I just. I just.”

He can’t find the words to articulate it. It’s a knife reversed like in tarot or tarabish, the dig and impact of the blunt end of the handle, nothing so refined as to draw blood. It is, beneath the acute pain — James dying, Sirius getting there too, the whole world falling apart around them — a horrible, weightless awareness that the one place Remus had to go back to will no longer accept him. He can return, but it won’t feel like home. He doesn’t know that he’ll survive long enough to even try, and thinks he probably won’t, but not having the chance makes him feel without nationality, without home, without an anchor. The absence of Wales from his short list of allegiances, of identities — Welshman, wolf, James’, Sirius’ — has sort of cut him out of his own soul and left him hanging on by a tendril of thin tissue.

James reaches up to take Remus’ hand in his hair. He pulls it back down and holds it in both of his own and plays with the fingers. He looks nothing like himself. Remus wishes there was some Slytherin kid here for him to push around. Anything for him to feel like the same person as he was when they were kids.

“What can I do to help?” he asks quietly. “Just tell me what to do. Remus. Just tell me and I’ll do it.”

Remus can’t tell him, though. There isn’t anything. And even if there was, he would lie.

“I just need some time to think,” he says stallingly, helplessly. And he leans forwards and kisses James once.

James sort of startles a bit, as if he doesn't expect it. He kisses Remus back, though, and his lips are cold. He touches Remus' face and his hands feel rubbery like a corpse. His tongue is sour. There's an unspeakable grief. In his kiss he seems to raise a knife. And it's okay. It's enough. Or Remus can tell himself it's enough, and better, he can believe himself.

He touches James' hair again. He tilts his head to the side and tastes teeth and a bit of blood. He holds James' head like a cup or a diamond. He wants to never let go again. They shuffle their chairs closer together. It isn't an urgent thing. It is far more a dying thing. This could be Remus' final resting place and he wouldn't mind.

James is the first to pull away. He says against Remus' lips, "You don't know how much I missed you. And how many mornings I wake up and think before I've opened my eyes that you've left in the night."

"Way to kill the mood," Remus murmurs, staring into those dark eyes.

James laughs— it isn't a laugh— it's almost wet. It comes from the throat and does not translate into words across the teeth. He crushes his chin into Remus' shoulder and his face into the side of his neck and he presses so close, with such force, that he might be trying to meld them together.

Remus, feeling urgent, crazed, wraps his arms around James' neck. They sway in their seats. He holds his lips to the top of his tufty hair, growing out, not grown out far enough. He prays to a god he knows is not out there for the world to be kind to them.

It's too warm. James' arms find their way around his stomach. He pokes his fingers through holes in the back of

Remus' knitted cardigan, pulling the loops of yarn apart to tangle flesh through them instead and to tether himself there. And that's where they stay for a while. Cold and shaking and together. Ephemeral.

Remus misses when things were simpler. But for once, simpler doesn't mean before Sirius left; it means before he did. And the white-hot guilt that comes with that is immense, it's crushing. It knocks the air from him.

Every good thing Remus has ever had has left. He realises for the first time that if he doesn't hold on tighter, it's going to keep happening. And he has no idea what to do with that information. But it's true. It's true. It's as true as his aim with the revolver. As true as anything is in the New War, or what remains of it.

"I'm sorry," James whispers into his neck. "I'm sorry for being... for... I know it was my fault. Remus."

"It wasn't," Remus says, though it was, it was. "I'm sorry too."

"I love you."

"I know." He steels himself and tries to mean what he will say next; he does mean it. He does. But meaning and doing are different things and Remus isn't sure he's ever been able to marry them in his mind. "I love you too."

Upstairs, Sirius doesn't stir. The sun keeps on coming up. Huw's letter sits in a crumpled ball on the floor and there is nothing uglier than the reality of the mess they have made between them. All of it amounts only to wasted time.

"I don't regret leaving," Remus says softly. "But I shouldn't have. And it wasn't your fault, but it was. And I don't know if

I blame you. But I do. I do."

"You can blame me if you want." James sniffs and it rattles. He coughs once but does not move away. "That's fine."

"I blame myself, too."

A pause. "I don't. I promised myself I wouldn't hate either of you for anything. And I meant it."

"But you should."

"But I don't."

"Does Dorcas blame Marlene? Mary?"

"Probably." James laughs wetly. It breaks at the end. "I miss her. Every single day. It's ironic, but I think I've never had more people I love in my life before now, and it's the middle of a war. That has to mean something. Right? It has to mean something."

It doesn't mean anything. But Remus isn't about to say that. "Right," he murmurs.

"So I have to find a way to make sense of it all and then keep going."

"We don't have to keep going." Remus holds his lips to James' hair as if muffling the words will make them easier to digest. Maybe it will. "We could stay here for the rest of our lives. Make our amends to each other. Keep Sirius here. Give him a reason to stay. Lock all the doors and keep him inside."

"It sounds nice."

"We could get chickens. Sell eggs."

James laughs, sort of hysterically. "Bake cranberry loaves and sleep on that shitty mattress."

"I'm sure summers are nicer. Less cold. Less storms."

"You make it sound like paradise."

"Maybe it could be."

James does pull away then. He wipes his red eyes and doesn't look at Remus. "We had our paradise," he says. "But we can't go back to Lambeth. We can't go back to South Wales. You know that."

"I guess I do."

"I've got things to atone for. So does he."

"We could atone to each other," Remus offers, trying not to sound desperate for something he cannot have. "You can atone to me. As much as you want to."

James wipes Remus' face, who hadn't realised until that moment that his eyes are streaming too. It's a gentle motion. "It sounds nice," he mumbles. "But I've got too much to make up for. After the war, okay? We find a paradise after the war. And we do it together. The three of us or none of us at all."

Remus doesn't think there will be an after. He has never thought there will be an after. From the moment Sirius walked out of their dorm on the last day of fourth year, he knew they would not get a happy ending.

"After," he agrees. It hurts. He says it anyway. "After."

That afternoon, the sky goes overcast with heavy grey clouds, thick and borish with the gummy cold of a soon-to-fall rain. James disappears for a walk — he says it's a walk — in reality, Remus knows as well as he does that he's off to meet with whatever Keeper he knows who ferries him around to deliver letters in microcosm. It has become something that goes unspoken between them all. James doesn't say goodbye before he goes and Remus doesn't call him back, only watches from the kitchen window as his hobbling, dark form disappears through the grass towards the trees, towards Kolka across the bay.

Sirius wakes some time past midday in a cold sweat and spends five minutes sitting upright in bed panting, greenish like he's going to throw up. He doesn't, though, which Remus considers a win. After he's up and on his feet, they sit on the floor in the kitchen together, in the dust nobody has bothered to clean, and Sirius tells Remus about the hunt.

"Kettering," he says. "Lily seriously never heard it was called that before?"

"Translation spells," Remus offers. "They're murder."

"It doesn't make sense. Kettering. She... she thinks it means something."

"She's Lily," Remus says.

"Meaning?"

"If she thinks something's up, I believe her."

Sirius folds his arms across his stomach. He looks drawn and tired still. "She seemed scared. Not scared. Worried. I wish she had known before."

Remus tries to piece it together in his mind. "It's all crossed wires, or whatever. It makes sense, especially considering that Direct Action ended. No consistent line of communication."

Neither of them has to bring up the obvious fact that any and all communication mishaps usually find their root with James and the delivery service. Maybe Lily would have known if only he had...

"How's James?" Sirius asks, obviously thinking about him now, too.

"Upset," Remus admits. "Not about anything in particular. Just upset."

"Oh." Looking mildly devastated, Sirius peers from Remus to the window. He's got his knees drawn up to his chest and his bare feet on the stone floor. He pretends to look outside for a while.

Remus nods. "I know."

"Did you talk to him about it?"

"He wants to talk to me about... about some stuff I've got going on. I don't think he wants to talk about his own."

"Stuff you've got going on?"

"You don't get to ask me that either." Remus stretches out a leg to poke Sirius in the shin. "I'm not going to be the first one to open up." He's tired of being the first one to move.

Sirius laughs shakily, though it isn't a joke, nor is it funny. "What can I do to help, then?"

“He asked the same thing.”

“It’s a valid question.”

Remus hesitates. “You remember the hospice?” he asks.

“Of course I do. I think about—” Sirius visibly winces, as if someone has cursed him. “I think about it a lot. And her.”

“I think I want to visit her.”

“Mary?”

“What? No. Galina.”

Sirius blinks at him. “I can take you to see Mary, if it’ll get your mind off things,” he offers. “I want to check in on her. Remus, you should have seen her. She passed out after she drank the cure but I saw her face change. I saw the pain go out of it. Apparently it’ll take a while for her to get back on her feet, but I’m sure she would appreciate a friend—”

“Maybe you can go see her,” Remus offers, feeling like he’s being cruel. “And you can drop me at the hospice on the way.”

Sirius squints at him. “What’s this about?”

“I want to talk to her.”

“Why?”

Remus isn’t entirely sure why. “She’s been on her own for most of this month,” he pulls out of thin air. “She’ll be lonely.”

Sirius looks very guilty through his suspicion. “I go see her sometimes,” he mutters.

"I just want to talk to her."

"Tell me what you're thinking."

A beat. "I don't know," Remus says eventually. "I don't— I couldn't tell you. Sirius. I just..." He thinks of everything Sirius has told him about her. About what she did for him when he was in pieces in Reykjavik and inches from drowning himself to escape it all. "I just think it might help."

Sirius doesn't seem to buy it. "You could just come to Nanterre with me," he says. "Come and see Dorcas and Mary. Yí'ān'll be there."

"He doesn't like me," mutters Remus.

"Still. I'll be there."

"You don't like me much either."

It's Sirius' turn to jab at him with his foot. "I like you just fine. You're serious about this?"

"I don't know why. I just..." Remus hesitates. "She tried to put the ring on. And there's... there's... there's something there. I've been thinking about it."

"Or you just want a problem to fix," Sirius contends, "and you can't fix James, or me, so it's her."

That stings. "Stop trying to psychoanalyse me."

Sirius shakes his head solemnly. "I'll take you to Hungary if you want." A pause. "Is this about the wolves?"

Yes. No. Sort of. "I don't know."

Seeming to know he won't change Remus' mind, Sirius stands up. He offers an arm.

The truth of, Remus thinks, as he stands and shucks on a jacket, it is that he spent months trekking to the ends of the earth to reach that hospice. Surely there is something there for him to find. He doesn't believe in fate, but if there is a fate, or if there is any direction to any of their lives, it must have been for a reason. He has to believe in something, and he cannot believe in himself. If there was nothing there for him to find, there is nothing but the road and the chains he carried down it. He has to believe in something. Something other than the breath in his lungs. Something at all.

The fields surrounding the hospice are so thick with carpeted white snow that they seem to swallow it. Sirius drops Remus' arm and looks at him hard for a moment, both of them standing together at the bank of a small spill stretching through the field. The doors glare at them from twenty feet ahead, closed against the wind. The stream at their feet is frozen, the surface glazy.

"You'll be okay on your own?" Sirius asks.

Remus nods once. "I—" he starts.

But Sirius disappears before his eyes, leaving only a handful of swirling flakes of snow shaken from his shoulders. Then, it's only Remus and the footprints in the ice beside him. If it weren't for the lights in the windows of the hospice, he might be the only person in the world.

Shaking himself, Remus begins the hike to the doors, shivering. The sky is thick with falling snow, drifting down in swirling gusts from the heavens and bleaching the whole

landscape. It could look like a dust storm if the sun was out, but it's too cloudy for any warm light. Everything is blueish white as if the world is sat beneath a lens, or under the frozen surface of a freshwater lake.

Remus reaches the doors. He shuffles a hand from the sleeve of his jacket to push one open and presses inside, arms around his stomach to keep out the cold.

It's remarkably unchanged. Warm lights hover close to the ceiling, spinning lazily like small planets, and beneath them, in the spill of their brightness, furniture and families are clustered indiscriminately, huddled on the floor and in chairs and around low, wide tables. Some of them are receiving medical treatment but most just look tired, not injured, and sit alone without the attendance of staff. There's a strong smell of something savoury. Soup or bread. *Warm.* It's warm.

A figure moves from a lonely older wizard nearby, patting his shoulder; their checkered apron has a small stain on it, vomit or pus, hastily wiped off. They turn to look at Remus as he closes the door behind him.

Remus started. "Aafreen?" he asks.

Aafreen does a double take. "You!" she exclaims, before sweeping closer and asking, with an air of secrecy, "The Order member!"

Sort of. Not anymore. But Remus is still technically with the revolution, he supposes, so he nods, trying not to look like something dragged in by hunters. "Yeah," he says, and coughs. "Hi. It's been a bit. How are you?"

Aafreen blinks. "Well." She gestures around. "It's quite a bit more crowded. But we're managing."

“Ah. I’m glad for that, at least.”

“Yes. Yes, uh, me too.” She hesitates. “That new stronghold they’re building in Dublin seems to have helped.”

“I haven’t been there yet,” admits Remus. “They’re keeping most of the people who escaped the Sanctuary’s fall there. Kids, mostly.”

“And more of the sick, evidently. That or they’ve slowed down on their own.”

“Unlikely.”

Aafreen nods. “My thoughts exactly.” She squints at Remus. “You look unwell.”

Remus finds it hard to believe he looks any more unwell than he did when they first met. He thinks back on that day a lot. The unholy image of Mary, aged by decades, sunken into her chair. Sirius holding his letters in his hands and moving like a ghost or a sickness back into Remus’ life as if he had any right to be there in the first place. He wonders whether a wiser man would have done the same as he did that day.

“I’ve been better,” he admits. “But I’m not here for me. I’m... visiting family.”

“Ah. Do you need help finding them?”

“I’ve been before, I’ll be okay,” he assures, before hesitating. “I’m glad this place is okay. When the Sanctuary fell, I thought...”

There’s an awkward pause. Aafreen straightens up, a very tired look overtaking her face. “We were worried for a

while," she admits. "I was. But I think we'll be alright. He's not looking for us. Not yet."

"He will."

"Well. Not if your lot stops him first."

Feeling unwell, Remus coughs and looks away. "I suppose," he agrees, voice cracking. *Bad endings*. Inevitability is all he knows these days. That and his decaying second tongue. "I'll go find my friend then."

"Right. Right." Looking harried, Aafreen strides off across the room to pick up a clipboard and start doing the rounds. For medication or food, maybe. Blankets, warmth. Whatever else this place offers as a substitute for the homes these people have lost.

Remus starts off upstairs. He tries not to stare around and fails miserably.

It reminds him of the mines sometimes. He has faint memories of seeing the workers come home at night as a child, returning from the coalfield and drinking in town with his father. There was a tired, sorry camaraderie among them, but it felt fragile. They were angry men with angry lives, and one thing could have snapped and broken them. Remus sees childhood tragedies in everything these days. He wishes he knew how to stop doing that.

Galina still has her own small room, a miracle in itself. She might not for much longer. When Remus reaches her door, he hovers there for a while, just looking. It feels forbidden to enter. Like someone will come and stop him. But nobody does.

He takes one step in and then another. He takes a seat beside her and waits.

Remus has never spoken directly with Galina Kovalenko. He knows her only through the image of her he has constructed in his head: strict, fair, somewhat nurturing. A bear trap, Sirius describes her as sometimes, though it always seems fond. A bear trap with soft teeth. He isn't certain those exist. Apparently, when she first met Sirius, it was in the process of stopping him from jumping off the pier in Reykjavik two weeks after he fled Rosier Manor. Remus hasn't stopped to think about how that makes him feel yet and is sure he never will.

She's dead asleep now, grey against the white pillow. She's got square features and whitish grey hair. Weathered and wild, even halfway out of this world. Black veins snake up the sides of her neck and her cursed hand lies on the covers in front of her, slung over her midriff.

"I don't know why I came here," Remus starts. "I guess I just wanted to talk to someone who knows him."

Her sunken eyes flicker open. They're pale and watery. They swivel around the room for a moment before landing on Remus and sticking there, surprisingly aware.

Remus feels intensely bashful. He had sort of hoped she would stay asleep.

"You," she says, and then coughs. "The taff."

Yí'ān has called him taff a handful of times. If he was English, Remus would've popped him in the mouth. But the Scots can get away with it, he supposes, or maybe the fight has drained out of him since he was a defensive firstie with an inferiority complex. The latter never went away, but at

least he's been able to hold onto something; at least something lasted.

"That's me," Remus says tiredly. "I don't have a name for you."

She coughs, a snapping noise. "Then use my real one."

"Galina." Remus swallows hard. "Sirius talks about you a lot."

Galina watches him for a while, not seeming under any pressure. If she knows her time is limited -- and she does -- it doesn't seem to have panicked her much. She looks extraordinarily calm.

"He does," she agrees eventually, somewhere between question and statement.

"I think coming to see you is hard for him. He blames himself."

"He blames himself for most things."

"He hasn't always been that way."

"He has since I met him," she says.

Remus can't hold back the question burning a hole in his throat. "Tell me about him?" he asks. "About Sirius. When you met him. Tell me."

Galina's slow, glazed eyes flutter. She moves her uninjured hand to rest it atop the other as if hiding it. "You can ask him yourself, can't you?"

"I've tried. And I'm trying." Remus feels caught between separating halves. Pulled apart by forces unseen. There is

white snow piling against the window in a strip of light like the ocean and he regrets almost everything he's ever done. "I'm trying. I want to understand. Help me understand."

Galina laughs, hollow and scratchy. "He was scared," she says, as if that explains it all.

"He still is," Remus contends.

"He will be until your dark lord is dead."

"I know that." Remus leans forwards in his uncomfortable chair; he feels the same as he did that day in the autumn, making the ultimate choice, the one he has been staring in the face for what feels like all his life. *Will you stay? Will you stay?* "Tell me."

Galina closes her eyes. Her wrinkled lips and her slack jaw do not tremble; she might as well be carved of stone. If there is a fracture in this room, it is Remus. He feels like the origin of the break. The tectonic break that will end them all.

"He arrived in Iceland smuggled onto a cargo ship," she says. "Lived in a cave for weeks and hitchhiked south to Reykjavik. Worked at a contraband bay, processing crates of my boy's grass. We noticed him and we knew."

"He found work?"

"He found a bed. That was the miracle."

Remus pictures a younger Sirius in his mind, curled in a cave somewhere, set into the ice. Broken like James was after Rosier. Mumbling like he did about Dumbledore and fire, and a melting. Andromeda and her shoulder.

“You took him in,” he says, tearing his mind from the image.

“He fell into our laps. I think he would have found his way to us had we not found him first.”

“And you took care of him.”

Galina shrugs; it seems to take an immense effort. “He slept on the sofa,” she rasps, shaking, hacking-- it’s a laugh, Remus realises, she’s laughing. As if it’s funny. And it is sort of funny. The Dark Lord’s Chosen One sleeping rough on the coast of Iceland and drinking tea. He almost laughs too, but can’t muster enough humour for it. “The sofa. And we took care of him.”

“But he was a mess.”

She raises a silver eyebrow at Remus. “I have taken in messes before,” she says, still half laughing. “How do you think Yí’ān came to me? Whole? Wars don’t make whole wizards. Only pieces.”

Remus feels abruptly, terribly sad, as if he’s swimming against an unbreaking tide. “But we can fix him,” he says with no small amount of desperation.

“I’m not sure you can.”

“We can try.”

“And if it doesn’t work?”

“Keep all of the pieces together. Put them in a jar.” Remus knows even as he says it that he’s bullshitting but when isn’t he? He loves too much and always has. And whether Sirius hates him because he understands him or he hates

him because he doesn't, he hates him nonetheless, and Remus can take hatred, but he isn't sure he can take the lack of it; maybe that's why he left James in London. Maybe he wanted teeth, those that weren't his own. The wolves left a bite scar across his left side and it felt like a more familiar love than any lips have ever left on him.

Galina nods once. "We did," she says.

"And was it enough?"

She gestures to herself. "He'll mourn me when I die," she says. "So maybe nothing will be enough."

"He'll mourn me when the war kills me too," Remus replies, the most sure thing that has come from his mouth in weeks, not counting blood and curses.

"Then make sure there's someone still there to take care of him then."

"Of course." James. He will be survived by James. They'll muddle their way forwards, Remus knows it, the two of them. They'll inherit the last of the love their little pod has left.

Galina watches him for a while. "You worked for the Order," she says. "He told me."

"For a while," Remus admits. Pushing back shame, he raises his chin. "They needed wolves. I could give them one."

Her face doesn't change. There's no judgement there, only cool, quiet watchfulness. She doesn't seem to want to pick him apart. She's nothing like Moody was.

"It's a lot to give up," she says eventually, and is the first to look away. "The journey you took. For your country?"

"Yes."

"Was that all it was for?"

For my grief. For the sureness that I would never be as cared about as I wanted to be. For them. For them. Always for them. It feels like returning to a childhood home. The familiar sickness of leaving love behind. "Yes," Remus says again, just to have said it.

Galina nods. She holds up her blackened hand. "This will kill me soon," she says, "and I want you to listen to me."

There are lots of things that will kill Remus soon. He thinks if he has to watch James Potter cry one more time it'll kill him on the spot. The Dark Lord will not have to be involved. He nods once.

"There are legends where I grew up," Galina rasps. "Our history has formed around shared myth. A story. The story. You know how it goes."

Remus does. "Of course I do."

"And when I saw the ring that Sirius had found, I thought for a moment--" Her eyes go distant. She seems to shake herself. "But I cannot bring back the past. People die and they stay dead. So do countries."

"My country isn't dead," Remus protests.

"Then there is no need to die yourself to resurrect it." She looks at him hard. "I made that mistake."

Remus feels like the room is spinning. "I wasn't planning on it," he says.

"Then listen to me when I tell you: die for something you care about. Not anything else. Die and have it have mattered."

"You mattered," Remus croaks.

Galina smiles at him with teeth. "I'm not dead yet," she says, with an emphasis and a power like she is holding the world in her wizened hand. "And I will not be dying until I know that they have made it through this. I will outlive your Dark Lord. He means nothing to me."

Remus wouldn't believe anybody else who said that. Somehow, he believes her.

"I'll tell him to visit you," he murmurs. "I promise."

She shakes her head, looking exasperated. "Tell him to win," she says simply. "Tell him to win. That's all I need."

By nightfall, Sirius comes to pick him up. He apparates into the snowy empty outside, his dark shape all untamed hair and heavy boots. Jagged limbs at tenuous angles. He stands in the cold and waits for Remus, who trudges to his side, shivering.

"Sorry I'm a bit late," Sirius grunts, when Remus gets to him. "James is back."

"And?"

"In a bit of a state."

“Crap.”

“He’ll be fine. He does it to himself.” Sirius holds out his arm. “Hold onto me.”

Remus doesn’t take it. “Galina misses you,” he says.

“She said that?”

“No. But I can tell. She loves you.”

Sirius looks very uncomfortable. “I love her.”

Remus understands he thinks. Maybe he’s still got a bit of telepathy left in him. Sirius cannot go back to her just like he cannot go back to Britain. It’s a ghost he carries around. Guilt and other stuff. Whatever it’s made of, it’s heavy.

“Then try,” he says. “For me.” And he takes Sirius’ hand.

Sirius pulls them through space in a crashing hurricane of colour and light; his hand is the only thing that’s real. They come to land with a rocky crack on the grass outside their shack at the coast of the Baltic Sea, which is calmer tonight than it has been in some time, flat and dark. Ahead, the lights are on inside. It’s cold but the wind has dropped.

Remus hits the ground on his knees. He pulls himself up without Sirius’ help and as one, they start towards home.

“Is it manageable?” Remus asks in a low voice.

Sirius nods once. “He’s still together,” he mutters. “Just sad.”

“That’s not better.”

“Still.” He shrugs roughly. “Better than it could be. Come on.”

Inside, it’s relatively bright. Sirius has lit up the kitchen with tiny orbs of fluttering light and it’s warm. Not warm enough, but warm. James is sitting at the table with his hands in his lap and two letters clutched in them, head low. He doesn’t look like he’s been crying but he’s got a hopeless little slump to his shoulders.

Remus sits beside him. He takes the letters; James doesn’t fight him on it.

Both are addressed to *Ravenclaw Tower, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Scotland*. From parents.

“I’m fine,” James says needlessly. He blows his nose on his sleeve. “Just had to talk to some... some people. They’d been worried. They’re less worried now.”

“Did they get angry?” Sirius asks.

James shrugs, not answering.

Remus and Sirius exchange helpless looks. The dark sky outside the windows seems to close in on them all, feeling restrictive, feeling impenetrable.

“I’ll be right back,” Sirius says decisively. He steps out of the kitchen; the front door opens and then closes.

“Ah, shit,” mutters James. He rubs his face, looking up at Remus despairingly. “I upset him.”

“He’ll be fine,” Remus says, and drops the letters onto an empty chair out of James’ sight. “You shouldn’t do this to yourself. You’re hurting yourself.”

James looks at him strangely. He takes a deep breath and lets it out. "Can you just say you're proud of me?" he asks.

"I'm proud of you," Remus repeats dutifully. "You know that."

"It doesn't feel that way." James stares at his hands as if they have hurt him. "I'm trying to fix this. I'm trying to start again. But all you are is worried about me."

"This--" Remus takes those hands. He shakes them in emphasis. "James, this isn't fixing things. You're not making amends by finding people you hurt and professing your sins to them."

"That's not what--"

"Yes, it is!"

James pulls his hands away. "I don't know what else to do!" he exclaims, almost angry, not quite there.

"Rest!" Remus says. "Rest, and talk to us, and stay."

"Rest won't win the war."

"The war isn't yours to fight in anymore."

James looks away from him, angry, jaw tight with it. "I don't want to have this conversation," he says in a low, flat voice. "Remus, can we not? Please."

"Not tonight," Remus sighs, "but we can't do this forever."

"There isn't a forever. You know that better than I do."

"Stop-- James, stop arguing with me, I just can't keep watching you rip yourself apart--"

“Remus--”

The front door opens. Both of them go quiet. There are footsteps in the hallway and someone sticks their head in -- and it's not Sirius.

“Lily?” James asks, perplexed.

Sirius sticks his head in over her shoulder. “She agreed to do haircuts the other day,” he says awkwardly. “She's free tonight.”

Lily grins at Remus and James. It's very forced but Remus isn't about to comment on it. “Alright?” she asks the room at large.

When nobody answers, she clomps in her heavy boots to her Lambeth boys and pulls James into one arm and Remus into the other, crouching down between them. Her grip is sure. Remus and James hug her back. They stay like that, Sirius shuffling around awkwardly at the countertop, trying to heat the kettle with his fucked-up arm. One of Lily's hands strokes over the back of Remus' head and he feels treasured for a second or two.

She pulls away too soon. “I'm starved. You lot do have food here, don't you?”

“I made bread yesterday,” Remus offers. “Walnut bread.”

“Of course you did,” Lily replies, full of love. She pulls up a chair.

They eat in relative silence; Sirius makes tea for all of them, black and sort of grainy, because their filter has a hole in the bottom, and serves it in tin mugs. Remus slices soft hunks of bread and rations it out between them like gold,

served on pieces of brown paper. James doesn't do anything, just sits beside Lily with his ankles twined around hers and his head on her shoulder, and eats when she eats in a sort of clockwork. She touches his hair and pushes her hands through it. Everyone seems to want to do that since it started growing out. It's proof that he's still here. Despite rattling breaths and a halved chest, he is still here, still moving.

For the first time in his life, Remus is sure he's in love. It hits him suddenly and without ceremony, and he isn't surprised to have thought it. It's as if he's known it for a while. Not with Sirius or James, or even with love itself, but with the taste of fleshy bread in his mouth and with a warmth that does not feel temporary. With Lily, laughing at some joke Sirius told and parting her lips against the top of James' head, who has held his cheek stubbornly against her collar as if he'll come apart if he pulls away. With a smile he does not have to think about to summon. James was right: he has more to love now than he has had in all his life.

It is not a reassuring feeling. Remus looks around the table and thinks he would not like to die. And that's not a revelation he appreciates.

"I want to keep it long," Sirius tells Lily, and he has made it less than halfway through his share of the bread, but dutifully, he pushes onwards. "It's been ages since I started growing it out, I want to keep that up."

"You've got about three years of split ends built up to snip off," Lily warns. "I'll have to take a good chunk."

Sirius shrugs. "I trust you," he says. "Just don't be too liberal."

“Don’t call her a liberal,” Remus warns, sipping his tea; he burns his tongue and doesn’t care.

“Mortal insult,” Lily agrees, and slings her arm around James’ neck to keep him against her. His eyes have dropped; he looks half asleep. Sirius flicks his hand and the lights above dim a bit.

“You know,” Remus says. “I kept that fucking skateboard you got me.”

Lily looks up at him. “Did you keep *Das Kapital* too?”

“Of course. Lugged it to Hungary on my back. Under the chains.”

She laughs. “I should have gotten you something less heavy.”

“I haven’t had a chance to break it open yet,” Remus snorts. “I want the headspace to be able to concentrate on it.”

“The things you do for me.”

There are many worse things Remus would do for Lily Evans than read a wordy book. He leans over and tucks a bit of Sirius’ hair behind his ear, smiling to himself, and figures he doesn’t need to say that. He tries not to think of Galina and almost succeeds.

James stirs a bit. “Skateboard,” he mumbles absently. “You’ve still got it?”

“Never learned how to use it.”

He scrunches up his nose, glasses slipping. “I’ll teach you.”

Lily jostles her shoulder a bit. She pokes James in the cheek with her finger. "I need to do haircuts."

"Ah, fuck."

"Not for you. You're fine."

James nods, eyes closed, still half-asleep. Remus shuffles his chair over and Lily deposits James onto him, who promptly settles his head on Remus' shoulder instead, worn out.

Sirius stands up, stretching his long arms high above him. He cracks all the joints in his elbows and shoulders.

"Alright," he says. "Let's get this over with."

"Sink," Lily tells him. "Up on the counter."

Sirius clambers up to sit with his feet beneath the tap, shaking his hair out to settle behind his shoulders. Lily sits sidesaddle behind him and pulls a pair of scissors from inside her jacket. It's just like it was back then, last March, in their tiny flat with their tiny bed. Almost a year ago now. A whole world away. Remus would be surprised if the apartment in Lambeth was even still standing. He knows logically that central London will survive, but he can't imagine it making it. In his head, everything is ablaze by now.

Lily hesitates with the scissors in her hands. She leans over to whisper something in Sirius' ear. Remus doesn't catch it.

Sirius pauses, then murmurs back. Then, as if nothing happened, Lily sits back and begins raking her fingers through his hair, tackling tangles.

“Christ, this needs a wash,” she mutters. “I’m washing this for you. I don’t care if we need to apparate to a five-star hotel.”

Laughing, Sirius tips his head back, bony chin rising. Steam from the tea has brought colour to his ghostly face. He’s put back on some of the weight he’s lost since Hogwarts. Remus looks at him and sees a human, something alive. “Do your worst.”

“This’ll be choppy.”

“I don’t care. Claude’s hair is choppy too.”

“If they heard you say that, they’d develop a complex about it.”

“Then don’t tell them I said it.”

Lily levels her scissors with the tips of Sirius’ frayed black hair. With the steady hands of a hunter, she begins to snip.

Remus leans back in his chair and James comes with him, chasing him there. The warmth has grown with three more bodies in here. Someone has hidden the letters out of sight. They lie against each other; Remus closes his eyes and pretends he’s home.

Chapter End Notes

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IMPLOSION

Chapter Notes

brrrr. london thunder type chapter

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Severus,

As a force of habit, I almost always begin letters with 'my dearest'. It's how I was taught to write them when I was a kid, which was a bit stupid in retrospect; I couldn't exactly write to my boss or my landlord like that, so there probably isn't much utility to it. And what I'm saying is that I sat down to write this out to you and I almost started it with that, but I just couldn't. It doesn't feel like it fits anymore.

I don't know why I'm writing to you. Or maybe I do and I just won't admit it to myself. If you were here right now, you would tell me to clear my mind and think with purpose. And you would laugh halfway through saying it and tell me you sounded like me. It hurts, you know. It hurts that even now, I hear your voice in my head more often than I'm not hearing it. I don't want you to read that and think that means there's still a part of me that wants to be your friend; there isn't; I want to make it eminently clear that you killed your friend and now she's dead.

She's been dead since you first said a kind word to those death eater kids you call friends and there's no way to bring her back.

That was an important disclaimer. I think without it, I wouldn't be able to send this. I'm not entirely sure I'll be able to send this anyway. But it's worth a shot, I guess, and

recently I've been less and less fazed by risk, so if I see a chance, I usually take it. I've changed a lot since we were kids. I'd still do anything to stay alive, but I've come to learn that if I want to live through this, I'm going to have to fight for my place in what comes after, so you could say I've started early.

My second disclaimer is that I'm not telling you where I'm staying right now. That isn't yours to know, and even if it was, it's far too dangerous for that. I'm safe, I guess I can tell you. And I've got a friend sleeping with their head in my lap and it's making my legs go dead. So I'm not lonely. I'm rarely sad. It feels most of the time like there isn't much point in sadness. And what do I have to be sad about? I haven't lost anybody except you, and I mourned you when we were still at Hogwarts, between Padfoot's Army meetings and sobbing breakdowns in the girls' bathroom with Dorcas knocking on the door asking me if I was okay. It all feels so trivial now. I laugh at who I was then. I'm not sure the laughter is helping, but it's far preferable to being sad about it.

How are things at Hogwarts right now, Sev? Comfortable, I guess. They haven't figured you out yet. They probably never will. Your Lord knows, though, right? He's halfblood too. Someone told me the other day. I can't tell you who. Anyway, he probably isn't inclined to kick you out, so long as you prove yourself worthy. In which case, I congratulate you on making yourself so useful, you rotten fucking bastard.

It's less comfortable out here. I'm sure you can imagine. I sleep with a knife under my pillow no matter where I am. I have for months. Things have been shuffled around lately and most nights, it isn't certain that I'll have a bed to sleep in at all, let alone a pillow. I'm alright this morning, and

well-fed from last night, but it won't last. I almost got my leg taken off the other day. I thought of you as the cut cleaved right down to the bone. It's like a sort of conditioning. I try to conjure your face in my head whenever things are falling apart.

Severus, this feels aimless. But you know it's not. And I know it's not. I need to talk to you about something and I need to desperately, but I don't trust you as far as I can throw you. I know we used to be far more than we are today, and I know you still love me, but the way I feel about you right now isn't going to change, and you can't convince me into it. I won't be manipulated or blackmailed, least of all by you.

But if you sent me a message, or if you intended to, I think I received it. And I want to understand. I want to know how and why. NOW.

Write back to me; tell me the truth. I don't want to give you false hope, so I won't offer anything in return. You don't deserve it. You've probably never deserved it. But if it means even a little to you, I went back to Kettering a time ago and I walked through our streets and I thought about your face and, for a tiny, short moment, I didn't want to make that face bleed.

Fuck you for that. Write back to me, or don't. Either way, I had to send this; I don't have much of a choice. How far are you willing to go? How far??

Yours,

Lily Evans.

"That's a bad idea," Sirius says.

Lily jumps, barely keeping from jostling James out of her lap. He doesn't wake up, his soft downy head on her knee.

"Fuck," she says. "I didn't see you'd woken."

Sirius sits up and stretches. With his hair trimmed and given a proper wash, he looks human again, less like a wild animal that just crawled out of the woods. By the pale light of morning through the window, he watches her, looking between Lily and the letter in front of her.

"I said that's a bad idea," he offers again, neutral.

"You shouldn't read things without permission," Lily accuses, knowing it's flimsy even as she says it.

Sirius clicks all the bones in his fingers, each coming loose with a popping sound. He's got this horrible strange pointy sharp-edgedness to him. Lily wants to blunt him like a knife. "He'll report it."

"No, he won't." She spins her pen between her fingers in tight circles. "I mentioned that he's a halfblood, look. There. He won't hand that in."

"Mean."

"Resourceful."

"You're sure nobody knows?"

Lily hesitates. "They didn't know when I knew him. Chances are he's kept it even more secret since. Considering that he's still with them. Working for them." She laughs and presses on, even though Sirius won't get the joke, "Not a runaway blood traitor yet."

Sirius watches her, unsmiling. "Tell me what you're thinking," he says.

And Lily's got no fucking clue how to get around that. She isn't sure that she wants to get around it. She doesn't trust Sirius with jackshit but there isn't anyone in the world outside of James and Remus she couldn't say she feels safe confiding in, and Sirius is far more trustworthy than most, considering.

"I don't know," she says eventually. "I'm not sure yet. But the only wizard I know from Kettering is him; he grew up there. With me. We were—" She grimaces, feeling ill. "We were friends. For a long time. Friends."

"Friends," Sirius repeats.

"I'm not proud of it."

He blinks at her. "You were when I knew you last."

Lily shrugs. "That was before... a lot of things. He's a fascist."

"He's always been a fascist," grumbles Sirius.

"I am not arguing with you about this," she warns; for her sake or his, she isn't sure.

Sirius raises his hands, conceding. "I don't think he's a bad person," he snipes. "Just that he's sort of a piece of shit. Maybe I do think he's a bad person. Maybe I'm just fucking bitter. I dunno."

"I'm not saying he isn't awful," Lily sighs. "He's a piece of shit and I wish I'd never known him. I think I'd kill him if I

could. But. But.” It hangs conspicuously between them. The elephant in the room with his head on her knee.

A beat. “I’m just saying that if Riddle himself couldn’t make me go dark, it’s not an excuse that James— and it wasn’t just James. I...” He trails off.

“We don’t need to talk about this,” says Lily.

“Good idea. Let’s not.”

They sit in uncomfortable silence. Birds chirp outside and there is the everpresent sound of the ocean; it’s calm this morning, still. It was calm last night too, after Sirius stumbled into Lily’s tent in Portofino without warning and announced, as if proclaiming a decree, *James is sad*, and Lily stood up and pulled her boots on and took his arm without asking questions. James is the only one whose hair she didn’t cut and nobody mentioned it last night. Nobody will mention it at all. He’s like glass between them and none of them want to be the one to break him.

The Castagna is not an easy place to live, but Lily has lived in worse, and even if she hadn’t, who is she to complain? Cramped lodgings and bad sleep quality are nothing new to her, and sleeping with one eye open feels like an old friend. Hogwarts was comfortable for the time she was there, but intensely lonely in the same way the northern coast of Italy is at night. Quiet but not quiet enough. The constant sense of being a very small part in a very big game.

And she’s fine. Lily is fine most of the time and is quite sure she isn’t lying to herself about that. She knows what not-fine looks like; she sees it in almost every face she looks into these days. She sees it in the lingering dimples of half-fractured bone around Remus’ elbows where he tried to snap himself out of his chains on his moons alone out in

mainland Europe last year, left to heal on their own. She sees it in James' quiet, omnipresent shame, how he talks less now than he probably ever has in his life. She sees it in everything Sirius does and says and is.

The three of them are a mess, collectively and individually. They are performing devastation as a chorus and as soliloquy. Comparatively, she's fine. And Lily has one thing none of them seem quite sure they possess; she wants to live more than she has ever wanted anything. She wants to take life by the throat and eat it whole.

"God, I'm so fucking hungry," she says, and she is so fucking hungry. She can't remember being this hungry in her life. It burrows a hole in her ribs and eats her intestines. It sits like an ocean or an omen at the pit of her lungs.

"Ha," Sirius says. "Remus' bread was good."

"He's gotten better at making it."

"I know." He stands up. "If anyone knows, it's me. We've got green apples."

"Fresh?"

"Sort of mushy."

Lily takes James' head very gently in her hands and shuffles him out of her lap and into Remus', who is likewise dead to the world at his other side. Neither of them stirs. They probably need the rest.

"Well," she says. "I can put up with mushy."

"Good." Sirius shuffles across the room to a cupboard set into the corner, nails half dug-out, door hanging partially off

its frame. He rummages around inside.

"I don't want to wake them," Lily puts in. "We should sit outside."

Sirius emerges with a handful of apples. "Alright." He tries to juggle them and manages for three or four seconds before dropping two of them.

Lily laughs at him. "You're eating the bashed-up ones. Do you have sugar?"

"Uh." He plucks the bruised fruit off the stone floor. "In the tin on the counter behind you. Beside the bit that's broken off. Yeah, there. Christ, it'll be cold outside. We've got jackets."

Lily's got her own, she thinks she probably left it somewhere in the house. But the idea of wearing one of the boys' clothes is nicer. "Grab one for me," she says, swiping the apples from Sirius and plodding outside into the cold.

It's a bright, crisp day, very pale and blue. Low mist has eaten the world and the sea is flat as a millpond. The sun isn't visible through the clouds, but its light casts sharp, folded rays down onto the water, lighting it up gold and making the whole sky look like crumpled silk.

Lily wanders to the cliffside nearby and tucks herself against an ancient fallen log there, a few feet from the ledge where the long, dark grass gives way to rocks and a steep drop to the ocean. There are prickly flowers down here; she can smell wild garlic. She breathes in the smell of the ocean and remembers, in sharp bursts, swimming in the bay near Remus' house in the summer after fifth year, James ducking under to see how long he could hold his breath, Remus lingering on the rocks with his toes in the

water, bemoaning his bad circulation and showing Lily his splayed blue fingers.

Sirius drops a heavy brown coat over her shoulders from behind, startling her. He moves too quietly. The hood catches over her head and covers her eyes; she pushes it back, laughing a bit, and shuffles her arms into the sleeves. It's fleece inside and she feels consumed and sort of mummified by it.

They sit in communal quiet. Lily takes out her knife and begins splitting the apples into quarters, then eights, coring them and tossing the pips at Sirius, who crunches them down, staring off over the water without speaking. She opens the tin of sugar.

"I used to do this as a kid," she says, handing him a palmful of apple slices. "Look." She gathers a pinch of sugar between her fingers and sprinkles it over the pale flesh, taking a bite.

Sirius squints at her, confused. "They're sweet anyway," he says.

"Just try it," Lily urges. "It's good. Gives it texture. I did it with—" She doesn't finish the sentence; he probably knows what she meant.

Sighing with defeat, Sirius copies her. He shovels a slice into his mouth and chews, hollow jaw working. Lily watches his eyes widen.

"That's good," he says, sort of shocked, as if having stumbled on his own small cure.

"You should trust my judgement," says Lily, beaming.

Sirius takes another slice. "So," he says, chewing, with the sticky grains of brown sugar still stuck to the tips of his fingers. "You want me to take you to London. *Me.*"

"You don't have to stay if you don't want to," says Lily, wincing. She really should have waited until this morning to ask him. It's a miracle neither James nor Remus heard them last night, scissors in Lily's hands. She had quite frankly been surprised Sirius let her (or anybody) sit behind him with a sharp object against his back.

"That's not what it's about," Sirius sighs. "It's about being there. You know it's about being there."

He seems calm today. Calmer than he was, anyway.

Lily thinks for a while, chewing on another slice of green apple, how best to go about this. Sirius doesn't seem in any particular hurry to get anywhere. They won't be off hunting again until Claude needs more ingredients, which will be soon, but they have been afforded a few days off. Maybe even a few weeks.

"I just," she says, and hesitates. "I just think it kills two birds with one stone. Pop in and pop out — a five minute job. You can ping me there and then come get me at a checkpoint or something. You don't have to step foot on British soil for more than two seconds."

"Your two birds," Sirius says levelly.

"James. And... this." She brandishes her letter to Severus at him.

"James?"

“He needs someone to get those letters from parents into Hogwarts. We can be the ones to do it.”

“He’ll want to come with us.”

“If we do it and tell him afterwards, there’s nothing he can do.”

If Sirius was Remus, he might have said something about trust or integrity of being open with one another. Working as a unit. But he is not a team player, so he doesn’t mention the duplicity.

“Well,” is all he says. “You make a good point. But my answer is still no.”

“I’ll go on my own if I have to. Pay someone from the Castagna to get me there.”

“They wouldn’t take all the money in the world,” Sirius dismisses. “London? Come off it. You need me. And I’m not doing it.”

“Claude would take me there,” Lily says desperately.

“Claude is resting,” Sirius snaps, defensive. “They’ve been working really hard!”

“Oh, shut up.”

“I mean it!”

Lily waves her hands around, annoyed. “Sirius,” she starts, “maybe you’re right, maybe nobody else will. Which is why I’m asking you.”

Sirius shakes his head once. “I’m sorry,” he says. “I’m not going back to London. Not now. Not ever.” He hasn’t taken

a bite of apple through the whole argument. When Lily looks at him, he looks haunted.

“Sirius,” she tries. “If you would just consider it.”

“I’m telling you no. Listen to what I’m saying.” Sirius draws his knees up, planting his socked feet in the grass. “You saw what happened last time.”

“You went back for James.”

“Yeah, well, I would do anything for James.”

“So would I,” contends Lily. “You know I would. So why can’t you do this for him?”

“Because he needs to let the delivery service thing go!” Sirius snaps. “It’s dead. It’s over. He’s not... it won’t fix it. Doing this. Starting again. He thinks he’s making up for his mistakes but he’s hurting himself, you don’t know him like I do.”

“Maybe I don’t,” Lily concedes, even though she thinks she does. “Sirius. Sirius, this is me begging. I don’t do that. Ever.”

“I just don’t know why it means that much to you!” Sirius exclaims. “So maybe he’s got something to do with the name of some fucking curse or something. Big deal. What does it matter? You don’t owe him anything.”

“This isn’t about owing. This is about closure.”

“You think writing to him will give you closure?”

“I think it’ll help me understand,” Lily says desperately.

Sirius takes another slice of browning apple. He eats it without sugar and grimaces at the harsh taste. He's wearing one of Remus' jackets but past the turned-up collar, Lily can see a black knife flex across the white flesh of his chest.

"Sorry," he says eventually. "I'm not going back. Least of all to give you some... closure, or resolution, or something. I like you, Evans, but I don't like you that much."

He peels himself off the ground and starts off back towards the house, leaving her sitting alone.

"Fuck," she mutters to herself, before raising her voice to call after him. "I told you to call me Lily!"

Sirius doesn't answer her. She watches his lithe, dark form disappear into the house, flickery and delicate in the rippling grass.

No luck there, then. That's fine; Lily doesn't need luck. She doesn't need anything but her own wits. And she's going to find a way around this just like she does everything — and if it has to be something she does alone, she will do it alone. She would do almost anything alone. Because she's capable, and because she's alive, and because she's fine.

She sits in the lightening morning for some time and eats three whole apples. The tide laps in across the rocks far below and it seems to mock her. At least it has somewhere to come home to.

(This does not feel fine.)

Sirius takes her home at noon. James and Remus pull her into one of their stupid hugs before Lily leaves and they smell identical, like sweat and wet dog. And it's nice. She wishes it would never end. She holds each of their necks in the crook of an arm and settles her chin at the fissure where their shoulders press together. She watches the sky out of the window as it ruptures and lets the sun splatter light down over the world like a white wound.

She is the first to pull away. The boys might have nowhere to be today, but Lily's got no time to lose.

"I love you both," she tells James and Remus dutifully. "Don't do anything stupid."

"Us?" James jokes. "Never."

Remus just watches her dolefully. He seems to have picked up that something is wrong but doesn't mention it.

Sirius takes her arm and the world swirls and twitches, blood or tissue. There's a sinus-tightening feeling and it's as if Lily's tongue has swollen; then, she hits the ground, stumbling.

They have landed together on the top of the slope leading down to the encampment. Portofino is warm today and the heat hits Lily in a wave, making her feel slightly feverish. It's blindingly bright and the sun is yellow like a lemon in the sky. Sirius lets go of her arm and glances around.

"Well then," he says. "I'll see you when I see you."

Lily clears her throat. "If he needs me again," she starts.

"I know." Sirius forces a smile. "Thank you. For helping. I dunno..." He trails off and coughs. "I dunno what I would

have done on my own. So thanks. I guess.”

“No worries.”

They stand together, Sirius scuffing his feet in the dirt, Lily pretending to stare off across the sandy bay. There’s a sunlight smell in the air. Warm fabric and hot metal. Dusty like a city.

Sirius takes a breath and his hand twitches. He’s leaving.

“Wait!” Lily blurts out, and grabs his shoulder to hold him in place.

He looks at her like she’s gone mad. “What?” he asks, startled.

“Fuck.” Lily lets go. “Sorry. I just.” She closes her eyes and thinks hard. “Give me two minutes. Maybe five. Stay here. And stay out of sight too. Okay?”

Sirius blinks at her. “What is this?”

“I’m doing something stupid!” she calls over her shoulder, already skidding down the steep slope with her heels digging into the dirt, kicking up dry dust. She lands at its foot and, feeling urgent, jogs into the tent city.

The day is already in full swing. Mainland European wizards, witches and sorcerers — those who can still fight, those able to use magic — are packed into a cluster of fifty or sixty near the edge of the compound, against the rocky western edge of the bay, firing off stunners at hovering targets. Their shouts ring through the air; somewhere, someone is blowing a whistle for drills. There are more dragon hides spread out on the beach, as well as the body of what was once a centaur, shrivelled in the sun, lying in

the sand with the ground red around it where tacky blood has sunken in. Ready to be burned; one of their own, Lily thinks. He will not get a gracious funeral. He will not get a funeral at all.

The generals' tent looms up ahead, the largest of the lot. It's the artery of this place from which all blood and oxygen flow and Lily found a spot four weeks ago, after New Years', where she could shuffle between two iron storage lungs of grain and flour around the back and sit concealed against the canvas where one of the silencing runes has come loose from its stitching in the wind, allowing meetings to be overheard. She sleeps there more than she sleeps in her own bed. Listening and thinking. Making notes.

She has been inside all of five times, maybe six. Mostly to update the generals on Claude's progress with the cures. Once, on her first night here, she was part of the planning effort, and felt invincible standing over their huge map and staring at the moving parts, tiny models of ships representing fleets of wizards, moving on their own as information came in on their whereabouts. As what remained of the resistance tried to hold itself together, she stood alongside those who held almost all of the little power they had left and felt like she was part of it. But after that night, she was not permitted to attend again, and has burned with resentment about it ever since.

Once he's fully recovered, Lily knows Yí'ān will move to the Castagna and join the strategizing here. She's heard the commanders talking about how much information he's got, about the resources some northern mother of an old, forgotten rebellion used to have that she passed onto him. Maps and information lines and communications. Maybe Lily can get him to put in a good word for her. Or threaten him into it. She isn't adverse to using force.

She reaches the half-open mouth of the tent. There is a cluster of British insurgents rathered on a patch of grass nearby. Older than her. Children of Grindelwald's war. They stare at her and she does not stare back, feeling fuzzy behind the eyes.

Inside, out of the glaring sunlight, it's dark. She can't quite see if anybody is in there.

Very tentatively, Lily puts a hand on the fabric of the entryway and pushes it back. There is a sudden surge of something in her fingertips and up her arm — for a blind moment, she thinks it's cold. It materialises in a magnetic spike into pain, muscle-tightening and fierce. Like someone has set her whole limb on fire.

Lily doesn't let go. She grits her teeth so hard she thinks they'll break, feeling them pry at odd angles against each other; she pushes the flap open and steps inside, knees weak.

There are half a dozen figures clustered around the round table in the centre of the room. Upon it lies the map. It has far more ships on it this time than when she last saw it.

Lily lets go of the canvas. All at once, the pain ends. Her arm falls twitching to her side and she forces herself to breathe properly, having forgotten to do so.

Someone turns to look at her; through blurry vision, feeling her knees shake, Lily doesn't think she recognises them.

"I'm here to, uh," she stutters, still dizzy with lack of oxygen. She feels like her whole body is fizzing. "I need to speak to Minerva McGonagall. Please."

The rest turn to look at her. Someone asks a question in German. Then, in accented English: "Are you allowed to be in here?"

"Yes," Lily chokes out, and clears her throat. It comes out as a rasping cough. "It's urgent."

One of the generals waves a hand. "Medical tent," he says, and Lily ducks back through the opening, feeling the fabric burn her around the shoulders as she steps back into the sun. It is almost like having brief wings of fire.

She stands in the blinding sun and feels it on her skin. A branding — almost everything is a branding these days. And she is not whole but she is still in possession of a beating heart; and she wants something, and she will have it. But god, that fucking hurt.

Lily stumbles in a haze to the medical tent, the sky too bright, every path between the tents too narrow. She doesn't feel in control of her own legs; it's as if she's floating, head too far forwards, close to toppling. She stops and gets her balance back outside when she reaches it, not wanting to look uncomposed, sucking in sweet, dusty air in parching mouthfuls. Then, she steps inside.

It's starch white inside, metallic insulation cinched to one wall, held in place with small, rusted nails. The tent is far larger inside than out and hosts ten beds. All but one are empty; the sick and injured do not come here. There is almost no healing to be offered.

Professor McGonagall is sitting on the bed farthest from the door. There are no healers inside, only her and the needle she is pressing into the papery flesh along the inside of her elbow. Drawing blood.

She looks up when Lily enters, faint sunlight through the fabric above casting strange shadows across her face. She does not smile. "Ah. Evans."

"Professor." Lily clears her throat. She is not as good at bullshitting as Remus or Sirius, but she's not James either. She can do this. "There's bad news from Kolka."

McGonagall raises hand to stop her talking and Lily's heart sinks. But instead of tearing her a new one for bothering to come in the first place, the professor simply finishes drawing her own blood and pulls the needle from her skin, recapping it and setting it aside.

"Blood tests," she says in explanation. "Regularly, for all of us in the generals' tent. I'm afraid it is the only sure way to confirm our identities."

Lily blinks. "Polyjuice wears off," she says.

"Metamorphmagus transformations can remain indefinitely," McGonagall rebukes evenly. "And they have other means. We cannot be too careful."

Lily clears her throat. "Professor, there's news."

McGonagall nods once, pressing a cotton pad to the injection site. "Yes?"

"They think Remus is missing. James and Sirius and I are going to look for him," Lily says. It's the best she can do; offering that Sirius is missing would stir up a full search party, but if she said James' name, she's sure McGonagall wouldn't let her go at all. "I don't know how long I'll be. Is that okay?"

McGonagall peers at her. She has dealt with enough bullshitting students in her life that she can probably see right through Lily. But what can she do about it? It's not like Lily is very important, anyway. She's certainly not useful.

"Lupin," she repeats.

"Yes, professor."

A pregnant pause. "You have two days," says McGonagall eventually. "Do you suspect foul play?"

"Always," replies Lily, hoping her tone is sufficiently light, so as to not have to answer sincerely.

McGonagall stands up, looking harried. She sways once on her feet and grips the bed's iron frame to stay upright.

"Fine," she says shortly, and Lily feels like a victorious lion who will not go hungry tonight. "Go."

At the top of the hill, Sirius has waited dutifully for her. Lily doesn't need to bring a bag; she doesn't need anything. Only the money in her pockets which makes up all she has saved, and her knife. A handful of empty potions vials too. Just in case. She's trying to get in the habit of carrying stuff like that around.

"What the fuck?" he asks her, when Lily reaches him.

"So, I'm lying, sort of," says Lily. "To them. Take me to Wales."

Sirius stares. "Wales," he stammers.

“Wales,” repeats Lily. “I can give you the coordinates. Just drop me off and scarper. No London involved.”

“Stop,” Sirius cuts in. “Explain?”

“So what I’m saying is I have two days,” Lily says, mildly frantic. “She’s given me two days. And I need to get there. So.”

He puts his cold hands on her shoulders. Maybe he’s got bad circulation too. He sort of has to in the bad arm, right?

“Stop,” he says again. “Look at me. Two days to do what?”

Lily stares at him like he’s crazy. “I’m going to London,” she says. “You’re taking me to Wales and I’m taking a train as far as it’ll take me east, and I’m going to London. And you’re picking me up in two days. It’s Wales, Sirius. Remus’ Wales. It’s hardly Britain at all.”

Sirius pulls away from her. He looks like he might be sick again. Lily remembers the road to Kettering. The uncertainty as to whether touching him would break him apart or stitch him together. Riddle and Sirius and the whole ugly mess have been a force of gravitational magnitudes in Lily’s life since the morning she got on the train at the beginning of fifth year to find that he was gone. It feels sometimes like he shouldn’t be here at all.

“Give me a minute,” he says in a croaky voice, and steps away from her. Lily backs off too and wonders how it is possible to feel like you share no common language with someone you’ve been speaking English with for years.

Sirius threads his hands through his freshly cut hair and staggers away from the encampment, back turned to the sunlight. The snip really did help. He looks less frizzy now,

less frazzled. More put-together. But it's an illusion. He is the mess he's always been.

Looking lost, he sits down a few feet away, halfway behind a thicket of cranberries. Lily shuffles over and sits beside him, a foot of distance between them, not touching him. They duck their heads against the sunlight.

"So let me get this straight," says Sirius. "You want me to drop you in South Wales and leave you there for two days."

"Yes," Lily agrees.

"And you don't need me to stay with you. You won't ask me to stay."

"Yes."

"I don't trust it."

Lily gets the impression he doesn't trust most good things. That's something he and Remus have in common. "I don't have any reason to lie to you."

"You could be a death eater in disguise. You could be Riddle under polyjuice."

"Riddle wouldn't do this," contends Lily, and tucks a flyaway lock of hair behind Sirius' ear.

Sirius shudders, full-body. It consumes him. "Yes, he would," he says with emphasis.

Feeling chilled and sort of like she's drowning, Lily looks away. She takes her hand back and drops it into her lap. She wants to reach for a cranberry or five and eat them in one bite. She wants— she wants. She wants.

"Please," she murmurs. "One round trip. You won't have to think of me at all in those days."

"But I will," says Sirius.

"But you know I'm capable."

"You're an amateur."

"I'm good at protecting myself," Lily offers, knowing it's one thing about her he cannot deny. She's good at staying alive and has been good at staying alive since before he knew her. She thinks sometimes that she will spend her whole life preempting the next punch.

Sirius looks across at her. His grey eyes are bloodshot. He looks sickly and blue, pale in nonsensical places. Blotchy and discoloured like cadaver or cheesecloth.

"Okay," he says after a moment or two. "Two days. Round trip. But I'm not doing this because of you. I'm doing this because I love him."

"I know," Lily replies. She feels warm-blooded again. "I know that. Me too."

Sirius snorts, no humour there. "You can't lie to me," he tells her. "I'm good at telling." And he takes her arm and drags them back to Kolka.

Getting James' letters from him is shockingly easy. James and Remus are both asleep when Sirius and Lily get there, piled together on a grotty mattress upstairs. Lily watches them sleep while Sirius rummages around for James' stash. Remus' nose in James' hair and James with the front of his

face pressed into Remus' throat and his Adam's apple. The light through the window gives them a dusty golden glow, casting their outline into its own small sun. It seems like they could sleep next to each other for the rest of their lives. Or, in this instance, on top of each other.

Sirius presses a wad of letters into Lily's palm, tied up with brown parcel string. They traipse downstairs in silence and Lily tucks the bounty into her inside pocket.

"You've still got the key for that... box thing?" asks Sirius.

"I never took it off." Lily pulls out the chain she keeps it on around her neck and shows him.

"I didn't take you to be sentimental."

"Evidently it was the smart thing to do, considering."

Sirius scoffs. "I guess it was." He sobers, still looking sick. Lily feels more guilty every time she looks at him and cannot afford distraction right now, so she looks away. There's no point burdening herself with pain she doesn't need.

They stand in the kitchen. It really is a wreck. Peeling walls and cracked countertops and chairs missing legs. The ceiling is coming apart. Lily wishes for a lonely moment that she had come here with them and stayed.

Taking her hand, Sirius gives a sharp tug. He takes a long, long breath, almost so long that Lily thinks he'll pass out.

"You," he says. "Owe me."

Lily squeezes his hand. "I'm going to owe you for the rest of my life," she replies, and the world disappears.

Grass beneath her— the ground swings up. Lily lands wrong on her ankle and it twists under her. She scatters to the earth.

Sirius' hand disappears from hers. She catches a glimpse of his shoes, barely having landed; then he's gone without another word.

There are gnats in the air, millions of them. Lily heaves herself to her knees, hands digging into the mud. She's kneeling in the middle of a wide, green field. There are trees dotted across the horizon and she thinks she can see a town in the distance. Apart from that, it's more farmland. There are sheep speckled across the next grassy expanse, partitioned by barbed wire and cracked wooden fencing, more of it collapsed than has held strong.

There is a familiar smell. She stands up and turns around and sees only ocean for miles and miles. It's silver and still and the sun catches in pearly streaks on its surface; the sky is grey in parts, the visibility low from the fire, but the sun makes it through.

Lily could cry. She doesn't, but she knows that she could, and probably would if she wasn't on her own. She knows lots of people who only let loose and sob and break down in the dead of night with nobody to hear them and she's never once been able to relate to that; she is only ever made emotional when there are others there with her. On her own, she is whatever she wants to be. But the faces and voices of people she loves make her come apart.

She wipes the mud off her hands. It's rained recently and the air is fresh with it. Wales is still alive. Still here. It never went anywhere.

This isn't home; that's fine. She's good at pretending. Lily starts off towards the town and civilisation.

The train line from Bridgend Station to London only goes three quarters of the way. The last stop is Reading. When Lily finds a conductor on the platform to ask how she can get into London, he looks at her like she's crazy.

"Why'd you want to get into London, 'en?" he asks. "There's nobody out there anymore. Air's too dangerous."

"I've got, uh, family evacuating," says Lily. "Some of the last ones out. I just need to get to city limits."

The conductor peers at her. "I couldn't tell you," he says eventually, "but it was on the news the other day that there's buses somewhere. You could try that, like."

It isn't enough. But it's a scrap of hope, a shred of it. Lily nods and when the train to Reading pulls up, she climbs aboard and takes a window seat. She is the only person in the whole carriage and, she suspects, the whole train.

It's the same train, she realises then, sickened, cold all over. The same train she, James and Remus took to London when they first moved. When, to them, it felt like their time as children had ended and their time as soldiers had begun.

She sat in these uncomfortable chairs with them as they left the world as they knew it behind. It was a bright day, and it was grey inside, and green Wales had washed past them like a dream, none of them sleeping; Lily remembers, as if recalling another life, the feeling of James' ankles tight around hers under the table. How Remus slept against the window and it felt miserable, it felt hopeless. She didn't

grieve Macmillan or anybody back then, even Severus. She didn't really know what grief was. But she remembers, all at once, the fear. Little did they know.

Suddenly wishing she hadn't come at all and cursing herself for not remembering, Lily folds her arms around herself and curls up in her seat with her feet resting on the chair beside her. She doesn't look out of the window at the darkening sky, both night and the smog sweeping in as Wales melts away. She doesn't look at anything. She just closes her eyes.

They were stupid. Stupid even after they arrived; stupid, lying in their bunk bed in Lambeth, all over each other every minute of the day. Stupid to have loved each other as much as they did and still taken it for granted. And Remus was stupid; and Lily feels a swelling, ear-splitting rage burn up inside her like a fuse for him, for how he left, for how little he appreciated what he had. She loves him like she has rarely loved anybody, but if she could hit him right now she probably would. Herself, too. She is not exempt from blame.

It's anger at James, too; the letters, at the mailing service, at Dorcas. It's his stupid, self-important martyrdom, his inability to ask for help. How he set off after the voices in that forest in Little Hangleton even with both of their hearts and veins and organs tied in knots around his fingers and didn't think for a moment that staying might have sufficed. And every other moment is one in which he has stayed. He never left again. Not until Remus and Sirius dragged him like a corpse from a grave out of London, and even that didn't really resurrect him.

Lily finds herself burning in her forehead and in her cheeks. She doesn't cry but she sort of wants to scream. She

presses her face to her knees and curls her arms so tightly around her legs that she might as well meld herself into a contiguous flesh. She wants someone to blame. A fight. An enemy; a villain; she is abruptly so terrified of London that she considers jumping out of the window.

But it's far too late for that. And she did not make this bed, but she will lie in it.

The city sweeps closer. As night falls, the train ducks into a tunnel under the Severn Bridge and the windows all go inky black. Lily curls her hands around her knees, wrists crossed like an ancient funeral, and tries not to look.

The journey seems to last days. When the train resurfaces, it cuts through a small town, houses flashing by on either side of the tracks with their windows lit like pyres in the night. Their light smears through smoke stains on the glass. Ahead, east, the sky is red. Shepherd's warning, Lily remembers, maddened, from a fairytale she once heard. There was a Welsh version of it Remus told her about once, a joke about the mines. *Red sky at morning, shepherd's warning. Red sky at night, the port's on fire.*

The red hell, James called London when he saw her for the first time after the Sanctuary fell. The underworld. Lily feels like Orpheus.

When the train stops at Reading, she hops the stile out of the station and descends from the doors of the empty entryway into the city. There are no attendants around to stop her.

Outside, the air is so thick with smog that every breath burns a bit, feeling hot and choking in her throat, as if

hands have come to rest around it. The sky is orange and crimson and black. The fire is still miles and miles away, far too far to reach this city, but it feels incredibly empty. The rich will have moved away. The poor will have stayed, because if Lily knows anything about the world, it's that you won't be remembered unless you own it.

The streets are empty and quiet. There is no longer the hum and rattle of car engines and electricity, ever-present in the ground and the walls as it was in London. There is a solitary nightclub open on the deserted high street. Lily stops to give change to four houseless people and runs out of money like a fool and doesn't care, and then crosses the road to reach a man smoking a cigarette outside, leaning against the brick wall with the club's neon green light across the side of his face.

"Excuse me," she says, feeling wary. She stops a few feet away. "They said there are buses to London. I've got family out there. Where do they leave from?"

The man rolls his head around to look at her. He's tipsy but not drunk; he seems in control of himself.

"Buses?" he asks, and rubs at his forehead with his free hand. "Uh, crap. The ones out to the city?"

"Yeah."

"Family?"

"A round trip," says Lily. "I'm just picking someone up."

"There's nothing out there," warns the man. He sighs. "They leave from the National Service club in the mornings. You see the Morrisons up there? Walk 'til you reach that turning and go right, and stick straight ahead 'til you see

the church. It's the building past that. Got a Jesus sign in front of it. You can't miss it."

Lily used to go to the National Service club with her dad sometimes. She knows what they look like. "Thanks," she mutters, and starts down that way.

"Be careful out there!" the man calls after her.

"You too!" she responds over her shoulder. She likes strangers. There's less to lose when she isn't busy trying to hold herself together.

The whole world is muted and sapped of colour. Everything is grey and brown and syrupy black. Strange shapes move in the shadows; there are no windows open in the world. The handful of shops Lily passes have signs on their doors warning customers to enter and leave quickly, so as not to let the smoke in. There is not enough light for her to see her reflection in the glass of passing buildings and their panes loom like faceless voids through the dark.

No wonder James couldn't breathe in this. Lily can barely breathe and her sternum is in one piece.

The church spire stabs the sky ahead. In front of it lingers a tall, hand-painted sign, red letters reading: BLESSED IS THE ONE WHO READS ALOUD THE WORDS OF THIS PROPHECY, AND BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO HEAR, AND WHO KEEP WHAT IS WRITTEN IN IT, FOR THE TIME IS NEAR.

At its side lies a stouter building, pressed to the church's stone breast, brown bricks and a peeling white door. The National Service club is identical to the one in her hometown. English flags in the windows, faint light glowing through the red cross, and a plastic doormat with the

Guinness logo printed on it. There is a hand-written sign pasted to the door reading: SOME OF OUR PATRONS MAY BE VULNERABLE. CLOSE THE DOOR.

Lily shuffles in and obeys, kicking it closed behind her. It snaps shut. Inside, it's bright and sticky and the air is sweet like tar or the sugar dust of pill grinders. Denture tablets and beer. The sort of gummy miasma busy hospital wards have; the smell of a coming-and-going place. The bar is closed, its shelves bare. Probably nothing on tap either.

A tired-looking woman in her fifties sits alone across the room at a round table with her head in her hands. Lily thinks she must be a patron but when she raises her head, she exclaims, "Oh, dear. Are you here for the rent?" Her accent is vaguely South American.

"Oh." Lily shakes her head. "Uh. No. I'm here for the bus? The one going into London. Someone said one goes out from here in the morning."

The woman blinks at her. "Christ. Really?"

"Uh. Yes." She clears her throat. "I've got a family member out there I need to pick up. It's a round trip. I promise."

A long pause. "Where are you from? Do you know Carol? The youth club's still open, I can give her a call if you need somewhere to stay—"

"No," Lily says quickly, "I'm not— I'm nineteen. It's not that." She thinks fast. "My dad's still out there; he's elderly, see, and he had a major surgery in Mild End while they were doing evacuations. Pancreatic cancer, and it spread to his liver unexpectedly, so they needed to operate then and there; this was back in November, so it's been ages since I saw him. He couldn't be moved then but they've just

approved him, so I'm going to bring him home." She clears her throat. "I'm from Northamptonshire. Kettering. I was told there was a bus."

Not seeming to entirely believe her, the woman nods slowly. She stands up and rounds the table, wringing her hands. "Right," she says, "well, we cancelled the daily trips two weeks ago, love. Nobody's been taking them, see. The council wanted to make it mandatory that we keep them, but the National Express people have gone on strike, and there's only a handful who will still work..." She trails off, peering at Lily. "Oh, don't cry."

Lily hadn't realised her eyes had welled up until the woman said it. She wipes at them fiercely, shaking her head. "Sorry," she croaks, trying to keep her composure. This is unlike her. All of this has been unlike her. She doesn't know what's wrong with her; she wants to be in Kolka. She wants to see her sister. She wants many stupid and improbable things.

A warm hand lands on her shoulder. The woman guides her to a chair at the round table in the corner and Lily collapses into it, weak at the knees. She's parched and her throat scratches and howls with each breath. She hates the burn behind her eyes and wants to snuff it out. In that fire is a vulnerability she hasn't felt since Lambeth. She isn't sure she's ready to feel it again.

The woman kneels in front of Lily, hands fluttering. "Is there anyone I can call?" she asks tentatively.

"I'm fine." Lily sniffs hard, whole skull feeling wet. She can taste salt and snot in her mouth. "I'm okay. I swear." She wipes her nose.

“Do you want water? I’ll get you some water.” She stands up and steps away.

Lily presses her knuckles hard into her eyes, shoulders crunched forwards around her, feeling flat and deflated. She curls around her stomach and bites at her lip until it hurts. *Pull yourself together.*

A pint glass full of tap water is placed in front of her. She drinks it all in one go, puts it down and says, “I’m sorry, I just really need to get to London. And soon.”

She looks up. The woman — she probably owns this place, now that Lily gets a good look at her; she’s got pyjama pants on and a ratty sweatshirt. Socks with Paddington Bear on them. She clearly wasn’t expecting customers.

“Please,” Lily pleads. “Please. I need to get to city limits. I just need to get to the west side. I can get the rest of the way there myself.” Even if she has to run. Even if she has to run the whole way.

“I can try to call the bus company...?” the woman offers. “There might be somebody willing to—”

“No,” says Lily quickly. “I’m not going to— that’s crossing a picket line. No way.”

“...Sorry?”

She rubs her face, feeling the hard bumps of pimples under her fingers. “Is there any other option? Any other way I can get out there?”

The woman watches her, eyebrows drawn together. She looks intensely concerned. Lily is worried for a moment that she’ll try to call the DFE or something.

“What’s your name, sweetheart?” she asks.

Lily clears her throat. “Lily,” she says. “Lily Evans. Please. I’ve...” She sobs once. “I’ve had a really bad year.”

The woman sighs as if she’s about to make a bad decision. She stands up. “Let me get my coat, lovely,” she says.

Her name is Aparecida Oliveira and she’s second generation, she tells Lily as she pulls her shoes on, and she grew up in Falmouth. Despite numerous protests, once she has made up her mind, she does not change it. She’s got a tiny AMC Gremlin that she bundles Lily into, both of them coughing with the low smoke. Lily wraps her arms around herself, shivering in the passenger seat, and watches Aparecida cross around the front of the car and pile into the driver’s side.

“You’re sure you want to do this?” she asks Lily, with her hands on the wheel.

“Yes,” Lily says. “Are you sure you—”

“Oh, shush.” Aparecida starts the engine. “Yes.”

The streets are all dead. They don’t see a single other car but Aparecida still stops and waits at every red light. There’s a blanket in the back seat she says she uses for her cats to lie on when she takes them out to see her sister outside of the city. Lily takes it and bundles it around herself, trying to feel secure, trying to warm up. It smells like cat and baked beans and she thinks she had forgotten what it felt like not to need to watch her back. Even Kolka didn’t feel like this. James and Remus and Sirius are, in combination, jumpy enough to make anyone paranoid in

their presence. But in here, there is only the rumble of the engine and the swaying of a dangling air freshener hanging in front of the windshield.

By the time they've made it out of Reading and onto the M4, London's red sky looming ahead in a hard, bright line across the horizon, Lily feels less like she might shatter at the wrong word.

"Sorry," she says again, into the quiet. "This is a huge inconvenience."

"Nonsense." Aparecida drums her fingers on the wheel. "I didn't have any plans."

That's blatantly a lie. She looks like she's got about a million things she needs to be doing right now and isn't. But Lily isn't about to mention it, lest she make both of them feel worse.

Aparecida clears her throat. "Did you want to talk about it?" she asks. "Your bad year."

Lily laughs, waterlogged. It comes out sounding fake. "It's a long story " she says.

"We've got an hour and a bit," Aparecida offers.

"It isn't that far, is it?"

"It is if I take you into the city."

Lily stares at her. "It's too dangerous," she starts.

"I am not letting you wander in there alone," Aparecida cuts over her. She shakes her head once. "No."

Hesitating, Lily considers her options. She could stop now. Ask her to turn around and take her back to Reading. Or she could just start crying again; that seemed to help last time.

Tentatively, she says, "You... can you promise me that if I tell you where to go in London, you'll listen to me?"

Aparecida peers at her. "What?"

"The city isn't safe," Lily tries, feeling her cover fall apart. "But if you listen to me... listen. Can you promise?"

"Lovely, I know the city isn't safe," Aparecida starts gently.

"No!" Lily says. "No, I mean... there are bad people in there. Can you just promise me?"

"...Bad people."

"Bad people," repeats Lily. She pulls the blanket tighter around herself and remembers, in bursts, Yí'ān's cracked-open skull. The Sanctuary burning bright against the light sky. Patroni in the sky— Riddle, unflinching. Unmoving. Not staggering.

Aparecida says, sounding befuddled, "Okay. Alright. If you're sure, of course... of course I can. What's this really about, Lily?"

Lily thinks fast. There are a million lies she could tell and most of them wouldn't work but one of them might. But she's tired. Tired more than it feels like it should be humanly possible to be.

"I've just gotten mixed up with a bad crowd," she rushes out. "And I need to do something, and that's my out. After

that, I'm gone."

Peering at her, Aparecida nods slowly. She's probably thinking she really should have called the youth club lady.

"Your out," she repeats.

Lily nods. She burrows her chin into the fleece. "My out. I'm done after this."

"Is someone hurting you?"

"No. I've just done some stupid stuff."

"Is it drugs?"

Lily winces. "It's not drugs," she says quickly. "It's nothing illegal. I swear."

Aparecida stares at her hard. Her eyes flick to Lily's hair. "Is it...?" She seems to shake herself and turns back to the road.

Lily looks out of the windscreen ahead too, thankful that she won't have to lie. They haven't passed a single car since they got onto the M4. Only birds fleeing the city and roadkill. Not exactly roadkill. Squirrels that died on their own, scattered across the roadside; they didn't need a car to hit them. Dead birds, small ones. Finches and wrens.

"It's been shit," she says, not sure why, not sure how to stop it either. "It all started ages before all of this. In, uh, '75. One of my friends went missing. Not exactly a friend."

Aparecida hums, still watching the road. "Yeah?"

"He had this... this really shit family. And when he vanished we knew they had done something to him. But we got in

over our heads trying to get him back.” Lily draws a shaky breath. Modified for muggle audiences, she supposes. “And things snowballed. And I don’t think I’ve stopped to process it or rest or have fun for months. And I’m tired. I’m so tired. One of my best friends, he’s everything to me, he’s a sort of like this shelter I built and he’s stupid and dying. And I think about him. I think about him. *Fuck*. And it makes me want to cry if I think about him too long. And I hate crying.” She sniffs once. “And he’s dying. He’s my best friend and he’s dying.”

“Oh, dove.” Aparecida takes her arm and rubs it with her thumb like mums do. “I’m so sorry.”

“I’m okay.” Lily takes a long breath. She’s still half weeping. “I just want him to get better. I want all of us to get better. I want friends and I want to sleep. I want to sleep and not have anywhere to go the next day.”

Aparecida’s hand on her arm squeezes. She gives Lily a little shake. Just a small thing. “It sounds like it’s been hard,” she murmurs.

“It has.” Lily blows her nose into her sleeve and tucks her legs up into the seat with her, ensconcing herself fully in the blanket until she feels cocooned. “I’ll be okay. I’m always okay. Pretty much always. I’ll get up tomorrow and keep going. It’s just hard and I’m lonely. I’m so lonely. I want to live and I’m lonely.”

Ahead, a sign flashes overhead. HOUNSLOW, it reads, 20 MILES.

“After this,” Aparecida starts, “if you need a place to land... I know people in Reading who can help with things like this, sweetheart. People you can trust. I’ve got a sofa...?”

Lily thinks, *this woman is holding my heart in her hands like a spider in a glass*. She sniffs again and shakes her head; she takes either end of the blanket between her thumbs and balls fabric into her fists, wrapping her arms around her knees, feeling like Dracula or something else that wears a stupid robe.

"I've got people I need to take care of," she says. "And things I still need to do. The world's falling apart."

"Everything's going to be—"

"I just need to take care of my friends," Lily cuts in. She feels guilty for interrupting but doesn't think she could hear—*okay* without bawling. "But thank you. Thank you. It means a lot to me. It's been a long time since an adult... since a grown-up tried to take care of me. And I'm fine but it's nice."

She sees Claude's face in her mind and feels mildly guilty, but Sirius is Claude's girl. Not her. She is nobody's, where Remus has Wales and wolves and Sirius has his Icelandic parents and James has everyone he has ever met, even those who hate him, because most of those people love him anyway. This car ride will last another half an hour but she wants to savour it like a sherbet on her tongue. She wants to stay for just a little while where no war exists. Not forever. Just for a bit.

"You kids," Aparecida sighs unhappily, seeming almost like she might cry herself. "You break my heart."

Lily forces another laugh. "Turn off here," she says, pointing to the layover where the road splits. "I'll show you where to go."

They make it to Lambeth. Miracle of miracles, they make it unscathed.

South of the Thames isn't Old Magical London yet; it is only eerily quiet and very, very still. The smoke is so thick you cannot see from one end of any given street to the other. All the streetlights have been knocked out through the whole city. The sky is murky red like an ocean. Full of strange shapes. There is no lightning or rain, but the clouds don't feel stagnant. They feel like they are reaching down to grab them.

They don't pass the old apartment. Lily's glad for it. That is one wound she doesn't want to reopen. In her head, she imagines it to still look and feel the same. As if the three of them could go back if they wanted and hide there again.

When she shows Aparecida where to pull to a stop, down the street from the PO boxes, Aparecida shuffles the car needlessly neatly into a spot alongside the road and turns to blink at Lily.

"Well," says Lily. "I'll just be ten minutes."

"Ten minutes," confirms Aparecida anxiously. "That might be too long out there— the air quality really is awful."

Lily figures something far quicker will kill her long before lung cancer gets its shot. Still, she makes a show of pushing her t-shirt collar up over her nose and mouth, shuffling from the blanket and zipping her jacket up.

"I'll be fine," she promises. "Honestly. I'm tough. I just need to drop something off and I'll be fine." She hesitates. "Do you have a Tesco bag or something?"

“Oh. Uh, yeah.” Aparecida digs around behind her seat and passes Lily a balled-up plastic handbag, which Lily shoves into her pocket.

“Thanks,” she mutters.

Aparecida chews her lip and nods. “Be quick.”

“Always.” Lily opens the door on her side and slides out of the car into the night, slamming it shut behind her.

It’s *hot*. Oppressively, terribly hot. It hits her like she’s stepped into an oven. A thick, tepid, saltwater heat, so sticky she can almost taste it. There is a faint roaring somewhere far away, constant, like a ticking clock in a quiet room. There is no wind, not a lick of it. Only the smoke, so thick that Lily starts choking almost immediately, and the heat.

“Fuck,” she gasps, bending over on instinct to keep her head low to the ground. Her brain feels like it slams against the inside of her skull, right behind her eyes, throbbing. Something cracks somewhere far away. Thunder or a building.

She has no time to waste. Lily takes off towards the shape of the PO box building up the street, crunching across disused concrete, cracked in places. All the drains are clogged with thick, sandy back ash. More windows of passing houses are whole than broken, but many have shattered with the heat and with pillaging. Those few muggles left in the city must be getting desperate. She can’t blame them; she wouldn’t survive this place for an hour.

The concrete block looms ahead. Someone has bashed open the lock on the gate into the lot. Lily runs inside, still bowed

almost double, clutching her shirt to her face, and digs with her other hand inside to grab her key.

She slams into her locker — their locker — shuddering, shaking all over. The concrete feels too soft and the air too hard. She's as nauseous and off-balance as if she was in a bouncy castle.

Lily crushes the lock into the hatch. *Please. Please. Let me do something good.*

The box opens in a sharp, spilling motion, the hinge creaking. There are a handful of letters inside. Twenty, maybe. It hasn't been opened in over a month but Lily supposes it's better than nothing.

She scoops the outgoing letters into the Tesco bag, shoving the plastic grip between her teeth and using her hands to pull out the ingoing mail from her jacket. The letters James has collected from parents and Severus' note. Lily stares down at them in her hands until they have started to gather ash, falling from the sky, and she can hardly breathe, and she's sure her teeth will tear the bag open.

Only then does she drop them inside.

Lily presses the door closed. She locks it and shuffles the Tesco bag into her hand; she turns to run.

There is something hovering in the air behind her. Blocking Lily's way back to the road.

For a second or two, she can't tell what it is. It's bright and gold and sort of flickery; she thinks for an absurd moment that it must be a streetlight come back on. But it's too low and too big, and it hovers disembodied ten feet from her,

spinning like a sun. It's magical, for sure. And chances are it isn't friendly.

Lily prepares to run. She takes one unsteady step to her left and it flies at her and crashes into her right shoulder.

There's a sharp hissing sound. She braces herself for pain, a river of it, like this morning in Portofino. She forces her teeth together and prepares herself to exert every effort humanly possible not to scream. There's a sharp heat across her side.

Nothing happens.

Lily opens her eyes. The ball of light, whatever it was, has vanished. Nothing remains; it is only her and the street beneath her, which seems itself to be sweating. Either that or it's bleeding. Full of ichor.

"Fuck," says Lily to nobody. Not even to herself.

Then, she sprints the rest of the way back to the car, down the dark street and past dead birds and forgotten lives. Through this small graveyard. She reaches the Gremlin, throwing the passenger side open and collapsing inside, heaving for air and crashing the door shut with a sharp bang.

Aparecida stares at her with huge eyes from the driver's seat. "Are you okay?!"

"Drive," Lily demands, heaving for a clean breath, a breath she can take without burning. "Let's get out of here; please, please. Drive. Please."

Without another word, Aparecida pulls off the side of the street and peels off west, making a u-turn. Lily shucks off

her ashy jacket and folds herself back into her blanket nest and shakes all the way back to Reading, trembling like a sick animal.

But it's done. It's done. Lily isn't sure if it was worth it, but it's over.

She knows one thing for certain: London has been lost. And as long as that fire keeps burning, they are never going to get it back.

Chapter End Notes

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FAMILY MEETING

Chapter Notes

hi hi hiii hi . hi <3 this one starts strong and gets weird and rushed at the end but yknow what? it's a chapter. n it's done <3

enjoy worsties!! also ive been asked this a few times but: printing copies of this fic for yourself is fine by me! pls do send me pics! so long as you're not like, selling copies or w/e it's good. :3

ps: if u usually liveblog/livereact to this on twitter, ive recently left that platform, so feel free to uh. leave a comment! i am starved of feedback xoxo

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

James wakes unsettled, hanging off the edge of a nightmare about teeth. It's still dark, though morning light has started to drip in through the window, which is strung across with netting and a ratty old curtain that fails to keep out the sun on bright days. Remus is sleeping beside him with his face mashed into their only pillow, dead to the world. His back rises and falls gently and James watches it and feels something that is almost envy.

He rolls over. Sirius isn't in the bed.

Shit. There's a cold, consuming feeling. He sits up and stares around into the darkness, abruptly paranoid. Waking without Sirius beside him isn't uncommon, but there are no hunts right now, not unless Sirius didn't tell him he had one, not unless Archembeau came and collected him in the night. He goes for long walks in the mornings sometimes

and sits by the ocean with his feet in the waves, but never without telling them first.

Back clicking, James rolls as quietly as he can off the mattress. He can't stay in bed now, not with the beginnings of a thrumming anxiety growing in his gut. It has wrangled its way around his organs and he knows that if he ignores it, it'll only get worse.

Remus doesn't stir, unwoke by the movement. He's been sleeping a lot ever since they got to Latvia. James wondered for a while what it was — a part of the moon cycle, maybe — before Sirius told him one night, while Remus slept on, of the chains and the odyssey. A trek to Hungary that took months. It must have felt like years. It made Remus' underfed, tired visage make sense, how he holds himself now as if he might break. It didn't make much else make sense.

James stands and hobbles to the door, pressing a hand compulsively into the middle of his chest, the heel of his palm digging there. He rubs it a lot despite knowing he shouldn't touch it. It always makes it feel worse, as if there's an unexploded shell dug in there. He's sure he can feel strange growths under the skin and they keep him up at night. He gets paranoid often that there is a fungus spreading through the broken bone that will kill him suddenly. That he won't have a chance to say goodbye.

The hallway is lighter. Soon, dawn will have broken fully. The fuzzy blue glow through the windows feels ghostly. James limps downstairs and forces himself to drink a whole cup of the rainwater they've been collecting and then another. It makes his stomach feel uncomfortably full. It makes him feel a bit more awake. His gut hurts.

There is something in the grass outside. A dark shape like a dead animal.

It isn't moving. He sees it through the window and cannot look away. Pale light ripples through the grass around it. Whatever it is, it's been there for some time.

James puts down his glass and stumbles to the front door. He rubs at his eyes hard, feeling pebbly knots of sleep come loose beneath his fingers. The handle is cold and he's not wearing shoes; the wet, cold grass makes his socks soggy and he stands in it, staring across the grassland, where the greyish moors and the pearly sky curl like a cushion around the dark mass.

The shape doesn't move. Whatever it is, it probably isn't dangerous. But almost everything is dangerous these days. James wishes he had his bat; it's still inside, lying beside their mattress upstairs.

He takes a tentative step forwards and then another. It doesn't move. James crosses the grass until he can see it; it's Sirius, lying on his back, staring at the sky. His dark hair is fanned out around his head and he's half-crumpled. James thinks for one terrifying, terrible second that he's dead.

Then, he rolls his head around to look at him. "Jamie," he says.

"Hi." James shuffles to the ground and sits beside him, halfway kneeling. Greenery rises around them. He feels damp all over and shivers with the lingering cold of the night. "What are you doing?"

"Lie with me?" Sirius requests. He pats a patch of flattened grass beside him. It reminds James of Newhaven. The

pressed-down earth that lingered at morning where the wolf and the stag had slept at night.

James lies beside him. They watch the sky together. It is mostly clouds with patches of blueish sky poking through their mottled mess.

“So,” says Sirius. “You’re up early.”

“You weren’t there,” James tells him. “I could tell. I think that’s what woke me up.”

“Is Moons still asleep?”

James aches at the bones. Remus has never let him call him Moons. That’s Sirius’ nickname. “I think so,” he says, and links their wrists together between them as if docking a ship to shore.

Sirius nods. “Good.” Then, “That one is shaped like a lily. Look.”

James peers into the clouds. “That one? No way. It’s got the pointy edges but that it. It’s more like a star.”

“Stars aren’t actually pointy,” Sirius points out.

James elbows him. “A cartoon star,” he clarifies. “A fictional star.”

Sirius laughs hollowly. “A fictional star,” he says with affection, and presses his head back into the grass.

They linger in a lurching silence like planets or vertigo.

“Are you gonna tell me why you’re out here, then?” James asks after some time has passed.

Sirius' breath catches. "Just needed a breather."

"A breather from what?"

He hesitates. With restraint, he fishes into his pocket and pulls out—

"Sirius," James says sharply.

"I had to try again," Sirius cuts in, and places the moulding diary on his other side, away from James as if to keep him from reaching for it. "I just had to."

"...And it didn't work."

"No." Sirius raises, with some effort, his bad arm, lifting it into the air in front of James' face. The black saprophyte blotches have spread and his veins are dark and greyish against translucent skin. "It isn't happy with me."

James hesitates. "Tell me about it." He rolls onto his side. "Talk to me."

Sirius rolls over too. They face each other, lying with their knees touching in the dew, faces not far apart. Sirius has always been like a body double or a twin soul and looking at him now, James feels helpless and adrift. He feels miles and miles from who they were when they were kids. For a brief moment, it's like he's seeing a stranger.

"I," Sirius starts, hesitant. "I don't know that I can say it all right. I don't know— I. I had it, for a while."

James nods, grass on his cheek. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. For a bit. Before... Little Hangleton," Sirius murmurs. "I could do it. I just had to think of his face in my

head and I could do it. It was about anger then." A beat. "I don't think it is anymore."

Wind rushes over them with a soft half-whistle. Still half asleep, still with his teeth feeling out of place in his mouth, James nods again, though he doesn't know what he's agreeing to. He never knows what to say when Sirius mentions Riddle. Whether to try to laugh about it or to reach out and give him a hug; neither ever seems appropriate.

"What is it about now, then?" he asks.

"Christ," says Sirius. And he says it again. "Christ."

"You don't have to say it."

"None of us are saying anything," he says. "None of us are. None of us. I." He stalls. "I don't know." James watches his eyes flick to his arm and sweep across it. "He did it too."

"It."

"This. Made himself into this."

"...You're not a 'this'."

Sirius laughs; it's less from his throat and more from the crypt of his lungs. Right at the bottom under the ribs and past the bruises he always seems to have these days, from hunts or hunger — they remind James so fiercely of being a child again that he can't look at them very long. They remind him of the wedding. He thought of bruises then as if they were snakes that could have lashed out and bitten him. Like if Sirius had been hurt, he would be hurt enough to equal it, even if the pain was latent. They already shared enough. They were body doubles then and they are body

doubles now. They would have shared injury and sickness too. And they did.

"I am a 'this'," Sirius says. "I'm this." And he holds up his arm. "And this." He puts his hand on his collarbone, where knives sit like wounds.

James has smoked a lot of weed in his life and has tried other stuff a handful of times and once in June he sat beside Dorcas on the roof of a club in Muswell Hill and shot up into his left arm with a muggle needle and angel dust; it was skin-popping and was probably dangerous, close to the surface like seismic activity under the flesh, and he remembers the sight of the needlepoint under his skin and remembers wondering whether it would break off inside of him and what would have needed to be done if it was. He remembers little else of the night after that. Only colours and noise, a mirage like heat. He wonders now if the tattoos feel the same way. Sharp things that have lodged and stuck.

Sirius is watching him. "And this," he says, a hand rising to touch James' chest right in the centre of it. Where the ridge-bone rises out against the air. His fingers are cold. He presses their pads to the skin. He could snap James like a glowstick. "This."

"This isn't you," mutters James, and rolls onto his back, feeling the wound creak. He reminds himself to breathe. Each lungful still hurts as if someone has stabbed a pencil into him. He isn't sure it'll ever go away. "This is him."

"I'm starting to think those are very similar things," replies Sirius, and rolls onto his back too, away from James.

"You have to stop." James sits up and it hurts like righteous fire. "The diary. It isn't working. This isn't working."

“Nothing works.”

“Then we find another way.”

“Then we run out of time and we die.”

“Pushing at the same wall won’t make it come down.”

“This isn’t a wall,” snaps Sirius. “This is the problem I was chosen to solve. Nobody else should be pushing.”

“If you don’t ask us for help, you’ll stay like this.” James leans over him and grabs the diary, an elbow sinking half an inch into Sirius’ stomach. He thinks for a moment with something close to glee that Sirius will grip him around the middle and tussle with him like he did when they were younger. He thinks they’ll play-fight, small wolves, rabid dogs. But Sirius doesn’t put a hand on him.

“Like this,” he says instead, unimpressed.

“This.” James waves the diary in his face. “Hitting this thing until it hits back. Or until your arm falls off. We have to find another way around.”

“James.” Sirius sounds very pained. He presses back against the grass and closes his eyes. “Do you want to talk about what happened with the letters?”

James feels cold all over in a rush. It’s a chain reaction and it’s a peculiar, savoury nausea. There’s a taste like licking stamps or pus from a wound. His hands move in his lap without command. He feels scrawny and small and like something washed in by a storm.

“No,” he croaks. “Not really.”

"Then you get why I don't want to talk about him." *Him* seems like a hard word to say. Sirius' voice cracks on it. James remembers Riddle grabbing Sirius by the hair and throwing him into the wall of the shack. How Sirius flew and hit and shattered against it as if more ragdoll than human. Afterwards he was bleeding from the nose and the eyes.

"I'm just asking you to be safe," murmurs James. He presses at his chest again until it squeaks and groans under his hand. He feels like the lever of mercy. He feels like throwing up. "And to stop trying to be a weapon. And start sleeping in late with us. We don't know how much time we've got left to do that."

"Both of you have got years," Sirius protests. "I'm making sure of that."

"You can't know."

Sirius drops a hand onto the back of James' neck. His fingers toy with the short, tufty hairs there. "Yes," he says softly. "I can."

Later that morning, Sirius leaves to pick Lily up from London.

When James woke two days ago now to find his letters gone and Sirius gone too, he went halfway mad. He's not sure that most of what happened that day was real, at least not in the afternoon; the morning was a haze, Lily's arms were around his back, Remus' shoulder was against his like a wall. They slept for hours after she left, the two of them, shadows shifting around them. Remus still had bits of shorn hair all over his shoulders, small and impossible to throw away. James is sure he spent half of those hours with a

mouthful of Remus' shoulder in his mouth, not biting (this is not Newhaven). And when he woke up, the letters weren't there.

Sirius arrived home late that night to an apoplectic Remus and to James hyperventilating in the dirt outside the front door. He was hardly in top form himself, red around the eyes and shaking like a hummingbird. The three of them sat together on the floor in the kitchen beneath one of Sirius' lights that flickered as he breathed, Remus' hand on Sirius' knee and Sirius' elbow against James' stomach and James' feet between Remus' ankles. Sirius said he had gone back to Britain for Lily. There was something odd in it but James understands. He would do almost anything Lily asked him to, too.

And it was for a second, he said, almost every word half-formed, slurred like he was high or drowning. And it still terrified me. When is it going to stop scaring me?

Neither James nor Remus had an answer for him. James doesn't know that they'll ever have an answer for him. They both said nothing and that night, the three of them fell asleep there on the floor and woke with sore backs and not much to say to each other.

James gets the impression that one of these days, things are going to start moving very fast. He isn't sure he's quite ready for it, whenever it is. Maybe it's just paranoia (nothing he has ever had has lasted; he doesn't remember the taste of his dad's lurou fan anymore), but he's sure this can't stay the way it is. Something is going to break soon.

He and Remus wait together on the cliffs for their third and fourth pieces to return later that morning. Things have been strained between them but James takes Remus' arm

and loops it through his own anyway, hugging it tight against his ribs, pressing them together like paperclips or something. Remus squeezes, not looking at him. He smells the same as he used to today. Menthol. Paper. Sirius. In that order. Wind rustles through the grass and the sky has begun to open. Like a blood clot, the sun sits among the cotton wool clouds. Big and ugly. James doesn't trust anything so bright or unafraid these days, least of all something made entirely of fire.

"You seem to be breathing easier today," Remus offers.

James isn't sure whether it's a joke. He laughs anyway, figuring he's supposed to. "Maybe," he agrees, too indulgently.

"No, seriously. There's less... rasping."

There is not less rasping. Decidedly, there is not less of any bad thing. "Mmm," says James, and ducks his head close to Remus' shoulder, jabbing his chin in there. He wants to live in Remus' shirts for the rest of his life; he wants to put his hands up the back of his jumper and keep them warm against his spotty back, feeling moles and scars and other stuff like the rocky heel of the earth.

"James," murmurs Remus. "Humour me."

They're usually the other way around, the both of them. They have been since they met; they were when Sirius was still with them and they were after that, too. Remus does the lying and James is indulged. Remus knows ugly truths and James experiences most of them through a hazy filter. But lots of things between them have changed.

"I can humour you," murmurs James. "I'd humour you all day."

“Good. There’s less rasping.”

“It’s barely there. And it barely hurts.”

A tight smile that does not reach the eyes. “It’s barely there,” murmurs Remus. His hand pushes through James’ hair. He rests his cheek there and like collapsed buildings, they lean against each other. “It barely hurts.”

There is a crack. Below the cliffs, on the stretch of grassland in front of the shack, Sirius and Lily materialise and come down to the earth, twin frames, Sirius narrow and incongruent, Lily stumbling as she lands. He helps her to her feet and they stand together with the wind soft around them.

Remus stands up. He pulls James with him and they keep their arms looped as they clamber down to the other two.

“Alright?” he calls.

Sirius and Lily both visibly flinch. Lily is the first to turn around; she looks surprisingly well-kept. Like she’s had a proper shower recently and washed her hair with real shampoo, which is more than can be said for the rest of them, who get greasier and more tangled by the day.

“Remus,” she greets, looking slightly startled. “Sirius is...”

Sirius sinks into the grass like someone has cut his strings. James doesn’t think; he tears his arm out of Remus’ and sprints to him, crashing to his knees in the dirt at his side.

“Pads?!” he demands, hands fluttering, not landing anywhere. “Pads. Fuck. Sirius—”

"I'm okay," Sirius gasps, sounding ill. "I'm fine. Fucking hell. I'm good."

James forces back his panic. "Can I touch you?"

A pause. Sirius looks up at him, dark eyes so much like James' own seeming to truly see him for the first time in James doesn't know how long. There's gratitude there.

"Yeah," mutters Sirius. "Yeah, that's fine, I think."

James touches his shoulder. He pushes Sirius' hair back out of his face and sits close to him.

"I was a bit late," says Lily, sounding helpless. "There was a delay— the train—"

Remus puts an arm around her, though he's looking only at Sirius. "Are you okay?"

"Fine." Lily shudders slightly. "Not— it's a lot. I've got news."

"News," repeats Remus.

"News we can talk about later," Lily replies, gesturing to Sirius, who has lowered his forehead into the grass.

"Yeah," confirms James, feeling like a territorial cat, hands still in Sirius' hair. "Come on, Pads, let's get you inside..."

It feels often these days like this will be them for the rest of time: one injured, the other two like whining dogs howling at the scent of blood. It's an ugly existence.

Sirius manages to stand and hobble to the house. He speaks to nobody, shuffling upstairs without a word. When James

asks if he wants him there with him, he shakes his head once and disappears into the bedroom.

Remus makes tea downstairs. The three of them sit together as water heats in a rusty saucepan over the stove.

“He thought I was...” Lily says, hands knotted in her lap, struggling around the words. “He thought. He thought. He was sitting by the cliffs where he dropped me off and I touched his shoulder and he thought...”

“I know,” murmurs James forlornly. Sirius wakes in the night sometimes thinking he is sharing the mattress with two twin Riddles. It takes hours to convince him fully that Tom isn’t there with him. “It’s not your fault.”

“Of course it isn’t,” murmurs Remus, taking her hands to keep her from pulling them apart at the joints. “What happened out there?”

“You took my letters,” offers James in reproach, no heat to it.

Lily laughs, sounding faintly like she might start crying. “I took your letters,” she agrees. “And I delivered them too.”

“Shit. You got into London?”

“I got into London,” she agrees, squeezing Remus’ hands on the table between them as he holds them in front of him like a psychic medium in a shitty TV show. “And I got back out.”

“Maniac,” says Remus.

“You’re the smartest person I know,” says James.

“One of you is probably more right than the other,” Lily sighs, ducking her head. She looks clean but weary still. Her eyes are quite bloodshot.

The saucepan begins to spit. James gets up to brew the tea so Remus doesn't have to let go of Lily's hands. This feels familiar, this strange rhythm they all have. Taking jobs from each other, taking hits. An unspoken emotional fluidity. They are water and a creek and a river — a collection of rivers diverging. They all lead to the same place and flow in the same direction.

Remus leans over to Lily. “You smell nice,” he says curiously, half-question.

Lily laughs, seeming to find that very funny. Then, she laughs even harder. “Christ,” she says. “Christ. Bugger. Fuck. Bugging fuck.” She plants her elbows on the table and kisses both of Remus' hands loudly and with abandon. “I love you both so much. God. I love you.”

“That's sudden,” remarks Remus, bewildered.

“We love you too,” James puts in, trying to pour out three mugs of tea with unsteady hands, the saucepan shaking dangerously.

Lily laughs again, breathily, half of it seeming to come out of her nose. “I met a muggle woman,” she says. “She let me stay at her place last night. Use her shower. I stayed in there for an hour until she had to knock on the door and tell me there was water dripping into the flat downstairs and could I please turn the shower off because the steam would make the walls go mouldy. I used a whole bottle of lemon shampoo.”

“Used it for what?” James asks. “Not much there to wash.”

"I think just for the routine of it. To feel human." Lily draws a shaky breath. "I'd forgotten—" The unspoken word is loud enough that all of them hear it. *I'd forgotten Lambeth.* Running hot water. A normal bed. Food that doesn't feel like it'll disappear from in front of you.

Remus takes a shaky breath. "And you're okay?" he confirms.

"Fine. It's shit out there. But I was okay."

"Shit out there."

Lily hesitates. James feels her gaze on his back. He drops a teabag into each of the mugs and puts the saucepan back on the stove, turning to lean against the countertop in time to see her look away.

"The fire's gotten worse," she murmurs. "I don't know if it's spreading any further, but the smoke— you can't breathe out there. It's red. All red and black."

"We know," says James, feeling sick.

"We know," echoes Remus half a second later, quieter.

James clears his throat. "They've got death eaters on patrol all around it," he says. "Warding it. Keeping it from spreading further. Keeping people from getting close."

"Why would they care if people get close?" asks Lily miserably. "They hardly mind if muggles get hurt. And what can the rest of us do about it?"

"It's because fiendfyre can destroy horcruxes," James says absently, rubbing his forehead with the pads of his fingers.

“What?” Remus demands, head snapping up.

Lily cranes her head over her shoulder. “What?!”

“What?” James asks, blinking. It hits him. *Fuck.*

“Fiendfyre can destroy horcruxes,” mutters Remus. “What? How? And why are you only telling us now?!”

“I mean,” stammers James. “I mean. Presumably it does, anyway. It destroys most stuff.”

“...You don’t know for sure?” Remus asks.

James feels a heady rush of anxiety. It sits in his temple and he’s suddenly dizzy and freezing. “I must have read something in a book about it. I don’t know. Listen, forget I said anything.”

“What book?!” Lily asks.

“I dunno. Ages ago. In Hogwarts.”

Remus squints at him. “They mentioned Horcruxes in books in the Hogwarts library?”

“I don’t know!” James puts his hands up, feeling harried. “I don’t know. I just mentioned it might be a possibility.”

Remus and Lily exchange long looks, a silent conversation happening between them. James stands across the room and watches the brewing mugs of tea get darker and darker out of the corner of his eye. If he leaves them too long, they’ll all be undrinkable. Lily and Remus both take their tea weak.

Lily clears her throat. “If you know something about this, you need to tell us,” she says, almost sternly.

"I don't know anything." James pounds a fist on his chest just for something to do with his hands. "It was just a passing thought."

"But—"

"Lils," murmurs Remus. He shakes his head once.

Lily opens her mouth and then closes it again. She looks away towards the window, folding her arms.

They have no milk. James takes out the teabags and leaves them in the sink. He plops the weaker-looking mugs in front of Lily and Remus and sits at the head of the table with his own so as not to be in anyone's direct eyeline, hands around the mug, cupping it against his stomach.

Remus takes a tentative sip, the sound of it like a pin dropped in the quiet. Lily's feet shuffle around under the table. She has freed her hands from Remus'.

"I want to go see Dorcas," James mutters, feeling the urgent need to talk to her like a punch in the gut. Sudden and winding.

Lily looks at him. "What?"

"I can take you," says Sirius in the doorway.

Remus, James and Lily all jump. None of them heard him coming. James peers across at him; he's watching them with an odd, impervious look on his tired face. He's no longer shaking and looks too exhausted for it.

"Pads," James murmurs. "Hey. Come sit down?"

“Nanterre?” Sirius offers. He hesitates, hands balling up and loosening at his sides. “I can’t sit down right now.”

“Oh.” Feeling obligated, as if it’s the polite thing to do, James gets up too. He crosses the room and hovers awkwardly in front of Sirius, not sure where to look or what to do.

Sirius raises a dark eyebrow at him. The pale scalp at the sides of his hairline, above his ears, has started to go patchy recently. Either his hair has started to fall out or it’s been falling out slowly for a long time.

“Nanterre?” he asks again, far less a question this time.

James chews at his lip compulsively. He considers asking Sirius to let him finish his tea and can’t get the words out.

“Okay,” he murmurs.

“James,” Lily puts in. “James.”

He turns to look at her. “Lily,” he says, dutiful as a soldier. Her soldier.

She reaches into her jacket and pulls out a balled-up Tesco bag, tied up with brown string. “There were letters there for you,” she says. “Not many. A few.”

James stares. Legs moving without his permission, he crosses the room. Lily’s hand seems to swell and his vision feels like it has gone funny. He takes the bag, joints feeling like they’re pistoning.

“Thanks,” he mutters, standing there with the plastic package in his hand and staring at it.

Everyone is looking at him. James feels like it's that night in Hackney Terrace again. Sitting at the kitchen table with Dorcas on the other side and McGonagall learning the truth of what they had done. Like everyone in the world can see his soul and they know he is rotten right to the cells and atoms.

He stuffs the letters into his back pocket, probably crumpling them something terrible, and turns to Sirius. "Can we go?"

"James," Remus murmurs.

"I won't be long. I just need to see her."

"But—"

"Please," interrupts James. He rounds the table and puts his hands on either side of Remus' face. "This conversation isn't over. I'll be back. I just need to... I just need to talk to her."

"...You'll come back tonight?"

James steels himself. He knows what it's like to start shaking, how it's the lightheadedness that comes first, a sort of detachment from your own neck. Otolith rumble and muscle ache. There's a conspicuous absence of feeling or heat all over like a dead leg. He knows he isn't far from it now.

"I think," he forces out, "it might be time to have a family meeting."

"A family meeting," echoes Lily.

"That's us," Remus says, eyebrows drawing together. He gestures around. "That's us."

James shakes his head. "I need to go to Nanterre. Wait for me?"

"I wait for you every time," says Remus, which isn't quite the truth, but nobody is going to say it. He settles back in his chair, watching James like you might watch a burning building.

"I slept well last night," Lily sighs. "I can stay up a bit."

"I won't be long," James promises. Blind and staggering, he returns to Sirius' side, who takes one step back, watching him warily.

"James," he says cautiously. "You seem manic. Are you manic?"

James doesn't really know what that word means. He sticks a hand out. "Take me to France? Please?"

"I feel like a fucking ferry these days." Sirius peers at him. "Like your personal chauffeur." For that moment, the half-light of the kitchen on his face, he looks very unlike Remus and Lily. As if he could be an entirely separate species.

"Please," James says again.

Sirius takes his hand and squeezes it once.

"Make sure he comes home!" Lily calls.

Scoffing without humour, Sirius two-finger salutes her. Then, he pulls James into empty space and feeling like a magnet, James follows him into the dark.

"Oh, it's these bastards," says Yí'ān when they walk in.

“Sirius isn’t a bastard, don’t call him that,” protests James, shuffling through the door.

Sirius breaks away from his side like a detached shadow or a runaway limb. “Yí’ān!”

Mary’s still in the smallest of Nanterre’s bunkers; it has three beds in total, cramped tight to one wall. There aren’t proper window coverings. Someone has crimped canvas coverings to the openings where glass used to be, but it’s still very cold, and Mary herself is dead asleep, piled under what looks like four or five blankets in the bed furthest to the right.

Tsai Yí’ān is lying in the bed furthest from her with half his head still in bandages, which is less than when James saw him last. It’s been more than a month since the fall of the sanctuary but whatever got him, it was dark. If it will heal, it’ll take time. It might not heal at all. But at least he’s still alive. James, almost in half still, resonates fiercely with him despite knowing almost nothing about him.

Yí’ān cocks his head to the side when Sirius calls. Even through the sutures, he grins. “Would you look at that, it’s my favourite Miss Black.”

Sirius bounds across the room to his side. His feet skid on the floor. “You look better. You’re getting better? Please tell me you’re getting better.”

“Better, better, *beh-* tter,” replies Yí’ān, half sing-songing.

A pause. “What?”

“I need to get you listening to muggle music. The British stuff,” Yí’ān sighs. Sirius told James the other day that he doesn’t feel British anymore by any definition of the word

and that he's sure he never did in the first place but James is sure he would listen to every Beatles song on every album ever released if Yí'ān asked him to.

And predictably, Sirius says, "You do. Sure."

"Help me sit up?"

Sirius leans over to help Yí'ān upright. They stare at one another, both doing that thing James recognises very well at this point. Mapping for injury. Saying without the words, *did one of them get you?*

"I'm good," says Sirius after a moment, still not sitting.

"Yeah. I'm fine. James wants a meeting."

James peers around. "I need Dorcas," he says. "Where is she?"

"Smoke break," Yí'ān replies, peering at James. "What's going on? What happened?"

"I'll explain soon." James hesitates. "She's smoking? Now of all times?"

"Apparently she isn't sick of the taste of it," Yí'ān says. "She should be around the back of the bunkers. East side. You can't miss it."

James nods, feeling aflame himself. "Is Mary well enough to be moved?"

Yí'ān bites his lip. "How urgent is it?"

"I think very."

"Shit." Yí'ān sits up a bit straighter, wincing; his pupils visibly dilate. "I'll find Claude and see what they say. Sirius,

help me, will you?"

"They're here?"

He points to his left. "That's their bed. They've fucked off somewhere though. Probably something stupid like trying to help with patients. Instead of sleeping, which is what they're meant to be doing."

James nods to himself once. He stumbles back out of the bunker and into the daylight.

It's still noon in France. Nanterre is alive in the light. The air smells different than when he was last here. Less like death and more like humanity. Archembeau did not produce enough cures for them to tend to the whole patient populace here, not nearly enough, but a handful are already in recovery, those lucky enough to have been deemed close to death like Mary was. A few in wheelchairs and gurneys have been pushed out of their bunkers and into the sunlight. The half-cured kettered sit and lie mostly in silence, eyes closed, sunken faces upturned to the pale white day.

The east side of the compound is composed almost entirely of flat, tilled dirt; tilled for what, he isn't sure. Whatever they will plant here, it'll be the first time. Around the back of the bunkers is a narrow ditch, five or six feet wide, dried-out and a few feet deep.

That's where he finds Dorcas, sitting with her back pressed to one side of the small valley and her feet to the other, flicking a lighter open and shut in front of her. There is no cigarette to be seen, though it sort of smells like tobacco when he gets closer, stumbling across the dirt to the rim of the ditch.

“Hey,” he says.

“Fuck off,” Dorcas says, not looking up.

“Okay.” James takes a deep breath. “I know you’re angry.”

“Angry,” says Dorcas, and snorts without any levity. “I shouldn’t even tolerate you. I shouldn’t talk to you.” She hesitates and flicks at the spark cog of the lighter again as if spinning the wheel of fortune. Fire springs in a dancing tail like a snake from the metal lip. She looks up at him.

James stares back, trying to plead with her without saying the words. He thinks saying the words would probably make her hate him even more. His foot slips in the uneven dirt a bit and he sticks his hands out at his sides to regain his balance.

“God,” mutters Dorcas. “Merlin. Come sit next to me, you soggy fucking fruitcake. Look at you.”

James obeys, feeling as though he can do little else. He sits beside her, half-lying. They mirror each other, legs bent out in front of them. He stares at his own knobbly uneven knees, smaller than hers and sort of out of place; one feels longer than the other, the piston of his hips feels off-balance like Atlas has shifted around. Next to Dorcas, he always manages to feel discordant in himself. She seems sure in her own body and James hasn’t been since quidditch and health and bed that didn’t stab him in the back in the night with broken springs and Sirius’ long nails as he languishes in the throes of night terrors.

Dorcas presses her thigh up against the side of his. She seems to try to level their legs as if they’ll click together if she does. She doesn’t look him in the eye. The lighter stays in her lap, unlit.

“Why are you here?” she asks eventually.

James hesitates. “I said something stupid,” he says.

“You’ve famously never done that before.”

“And I think I need to come clean to them. We need to come clean to them. We need to tell them about the fire.”

Dorcas’ leg stiffens against his. The muscle along her calf jumps out, rock solid.

She doesn’t speak for an ugly stretch of time. Eventually, she says, “What?” in a voice with a lot of intent in it.

“So what’s been happening is,” James starts.

“No,” Dorcas interrupts. She turns to look at him. Her heavy face is just as he remembers it, her holding him in one piece against the radiator and asking him to stay, arms over the tops of his shoulders and slung around his mycelium chest. “What?”

“Let me explain it.” James draws a long breath. “What’s been happening is Sirius is trying to destroy the others. The rest of the... the things Riddle made. The things *he* helped make. One of them is already destroyed, and we have another two. Three left to find. And he’s trying to destroy them and he can’t. But we know what can. You and I know what can.”

“Oh, you bastard,” Dorcas says. “You. You.”

“Just hear me out.”

“No!”

“Listen—”

“You will not make me own up for your mistakes, Potter,” she snaps. “I’m not doing that.” There’s a brief flash of something very vulnerable in her face. “I just got her back. I can’t— I can’t—”

“They won’t take her from you. I won’t let them.”

“I’m not taking that risk. I won’t confess for your crimes—”

“Is it mine?!” James demands, heated now. “Because it was our mistake together when you were trying to convince me not to fucking kill myself, you told me then it was something we’d done together and you’d take the fall with me, so which is it?”

“I’m not negotiating with you on this.”

“Just listen to me!” James waves a hand in front of her face until she looks at him again. “Just listen. I’m not saying we go before the generals and confess. I just need to tell Sirius. Sirius and Remus and...”

“And Lily,” Dorcas snaps, “and Tsai and Archembeau and Mary. Right?”

“Mary doesn’t have to know.”

“For your information, Mary already does.” Dorcas scowls at him. “Unlike you, I don’t keep secrets from them—” She seems to catch herself. “From her.”

James hesitates. “Still nothing on Marlene?”

“The people at the Dublin stronghold wrote back.”

“And?”

“Nothing. She hasn’t been there. Portofino, too.”

James hovers a hand over Dorcas' knee and then rests it there. "Please," he says. "Listen, this is begging. This is me begging you. Please."

Dorcas eyes him. "None of us are stupid," she snaps. "This isn't about Black. Or his stupid fucking Chosen One bullshit quest. You don't give a shit. You just want to tell people how you fucked up so they hate you and you can feel like you've made up for it by doing that. You're a selfish, terrible person, James Potter, don't think I don't know that."

James feels a bit like someone has put a knife through his skull. Half-blind and like his brain has been scooped out. He blinks from Dorcas to the floor and then stares at his knees again, saying nothing. There's a burning behind his eyes.

"Don't do that," mutters Dorcas. She folds an arm around his shoulders and presses James' whole crooked unhelmed bag-of-bones mass of mess against her, gripping him very tight. She's got large hands and a bitter smell.

"Please," murmurs James again, into her side, where his face is pressed. "This one thing. For him. We can make them swear secrecy. Make them all swear it. Hold it over their heads 'til they do."

"You make me want to kill someone."

Ideally not me. Ideally not yet. "Is that a yes?"

"Of course it's not a yes." Dorcas looks down at him again. She draws a shaking breath too quickly, lungs stuttering. "You shouldn't be allowed. Someone should've killed you before the New War. Would've been better for all of us."

"I'll do it myself if this goes south," promises James, not sure if he's joking.

Dorcas grabs him and hugs him with both arms so hard his jaw cracks, teeth jamming together. “No you won’t,” she mumbles. “Fuck. I missed you. You bastard, you asshole, I missed you so much. Being away from London feels like I died there. It doesn’t feel real.”

That’s exactly what it’s like. James wakes most mornings thinking he’s in purgatory. A grey, ocean-smelling purgatory of rattling windows and blue sunlight. He grips her back and presses his face against her shoulder.

“Missed you too,” he whispers. “I can say it was just me, if you want.”

Dorcas’ nails dig into his back. Her hug feels less like a hug than the jaws of a beartrap closing around him and cordoning him inside.

“No,” she mutters. “No. I said we were going down for it together and I have to stick by that.”

“Maybe they won’t get angry.”

Dorcas pulls away. “Have you met Lily Evans? There isn’t a thing she’s not angry about most of the time.”

James laughs shakily, folding his arms around his stomach. “Claude is going to see if Mary’s alright to be moved. How is she? How was the cure?”

Standing and clawing her way from the ditch, Dorcas turns and sticks out a hand for James to take. He grabs it and she pulls him out and catches him under the arms as he stumbles, hands very sure at his ribs.

“She’s been coming on in leaps and bounds,” she says, voice less harsh than James has ever heard it. “She was awake all

day yesterday. Talking. She can move her neck again and they think they can progress her to walking sometime soon. With, uh, a frame. And a cane after that. And probably a cane forever. But that doesn't matter. She's here."

"They think she'll be able to walk again, though?"

"They hope so." Dorcas pats him on the shoulder once, hard. "Come on."

They trek back towards the smallest bunker, James running the information over in his head. "The infection," he says, "it's rescinded?"

"It's starting to," Dorcas nods. "It'll be a while. Archembeau won't give me straight answers on how long. But none of that matters."

James feels a slightly bitter laugh rumble up in his throat. "Out of yours and mine," he says, "yours got the miracle cure. Ha."

Dorcas looks at him strangely. Then, it seems to click. "Remus. Hungary. That's what that was?"

"Not really. It's complicated. He hasn't told me much. They lied to him."

Dorcas frowns. "I know that. If there was really a cure, someone would've cured them out of existence already."

James shrugs uncomfortably, not sure what to think of that. "When you see him, just... be gentle. Please. He's having a hard time." He reconsiders. "Sirius is too. And you should be nice to Lily, she's struggling, even if she won't admit it. And—"

"I'm being kind to everyone," Dorcas interrupts, waving him off. "I know."

"Sorry." James chews the inside of his cheek. "I'm trying to hold everything together. And I get the sense they all think that's what they're doing with me. So it's messy. And I'm tired. And we're going to Kolka, by the way, today."

Dorcas rubs at her face. "You really want to make a thing of this, don't you?"

"It's the only way I can do it. They need to know."

A sharp look. "No, they don't. You just want—"

James raises a hand. "People keep saying that to me," he sighs, "as if it's going to change my mind."

Dorcas looks away, heavy-eyed, the corners of her lips turned down. Even her shoulders seem to be frowning.

"Are we even sure it destroyed the thing?" she asks after a few moments, boots crunching stone and gravel.

"Yes." James thinks back to that night. The baptising fire. The sound of the ring screaming. He remembers it like it was yesterday and thinks of it often. He still hasn't talked to Sirius about it, which feels ridiculous now, but everything feels ridiculous. There are far bigger and scarier things they haven't talked about yet. "Yes. I'm sure."

"And Black can't destroy them on his own?"

"Absolutely not," James says emphatically. "He's trying. But it's not working. And if he keeps trying, he's going to make himself sick— that arm's already ripping him apart. I won't let him keep trying on his own."

“How chivalrous,” mutters Dorcas. She stops then and backtracks a few feet, stooping to pick something up. “Did this fall out of your—”

James turns around. “Dorcas—”

But she’s already gone still, holding the letters in her hand and staring through the translucent plastic at them. James watches her dark eyes dart across them, back and forth, before rising to meet his.

“Letters?” she asks.

“Lily went to London.” James crosses to her side and takes them back. “I haven’t opened them yet. They’re all that was left in the box.”

“You asked her to get them?”

“And to send a few. I found some parents.”

Dorcas barks out a sharp laugh. “One of these days, you’re going to self-righteously bleed yourself to death,” she says. “Come on.”

Sirius drops him into the grass. His hand stays on James’ wrist for a moment and James finds his feet underneath him, wobbling, feeling like he’s full of splinters.

“Thanks,” he mutters. “I’m good, I think.”

A moment later, Sirius’ hand leaves. James straightens and stares around. The Latvian coast has darkened and the Baltic Sea has too, deepening from blue to a sort of smokey

grey. Ahead lies the house. Their house. The house they haunt.

"I'll go back and grab the others," Sirius says. He hesitates; James feels his stare and turns to meet it. They look at each other.

"What is it?" James asks after a moment.

Sirius laughs quietly, only the low scratchy bits coming out, more breath than sound. He reaches across and brushes a bit of James' hair back so it sticks up, fingers not touching skin. "You must've slept weird on it," he says.

Self-consciously, James rubs his hands through it. "My hair used to be nicer," he bemoans. "It'll grow out in time."

"Lily told me you two made a pact."

"Well." James shrugs. "We broke it."

Sirius watches him. He lowers his hand to his side and James realises he raised his bad arm instead of his working one. He's not sure what that means.

"Thanks," mutters Sirius. He clears his throat. "For earlier. For asking. It meant a lot to me. Means a lot to me. Nobody's... a few people. In Reykjavik. But apart from that, nobody's really asked before. Thanks."

"Of course." James clears his throat. "Do you want me to ask Remus to do it too? And don't say no just because."

Sirius laughs faintly. "Sure," he lets out like how they drill into the top of your mouth and your tonsils all spill out onto your tongue. "Okay. That would be nice."

James raises a hand. "Can I?" he asks.

Sirius nods and he puts his hand on his shoulder and squeezes it, rubbing his thumb into the taut skin. Immediately, Sirius' eyes shutter closed. He seems to slump where he's standing.

"Thanks," he mumbles. And then, "I mean it, Jamie, thanks. For everything you do. Everything you've done. For staying. Waiting. You looked for me. And I left again and you didn't stop looking."

Feeling ill, James looks away. He did stop. He stopped for months. But he knows saying it won't help.

"I didn't do enough," he says, and before Sirius can argue, continues, "enough for you, I mean, because there isn't an enough. Nobody's ever done enough for you and that's sort of what got us into this mess, right? You don't have to answer that. But my point is I love you. And I didn't do enough, but I swear I'm never going to let him hurt you. No matter what I have to do."

Sirius blinks at him, looking like he's drowning. His eyes go sort of hazy like he can't compute this conversation right now or maybe just doesn't want to.

"Thanks," he says. "I... thanks." He steps back and disappears.

Off-kilter and tilting like unsecured railroad tracks, James staggers back to the house. He lets himself in; nobody has locked the door.

Remus and Lily have waited for him. They're sitting where he left them at the kitchen table; Remus is holding her hands again. They both look up when he stumbles inside.

“The others are on their way,” James says. “We’re having a proper meeting. Venner i Europa are on their way. Or, uh, both of them that are left. Both except Kovalenko. And Mary and Dorcas, too.”

“Mary?” demands Lily. “Is she well enough to be moved yet? It’s only been a few days...”

“Archembeau thinks so.” James collapses into a seat beside Remus and drops his face into his hands. This is going to be ugly, no matter how it ends. He’s got all the muscles in his stomach tensed like he’s waiting for a punch in the gut.

Remus puts a hand on his shoulder and then his forehead; James feels his warm breath across his back. He says nothing, seeming to sense there is nothing to be said that will help.

There’s a sharp crack outside. Lily rises from her seat. “I’ll get them inside,” she mutters, and rubs the top of James’ head with her hand as she passes.

The front door opens and there’s a frantic shuffling, Lily swearing; Dorcas’ voice saying, “I’ve got her, it’s fine.” A second later, she hobbles into the kitchen with Mary in her arms bridal-style, head tucked against Dorcas’ shoulder, eyes half-open, seeming only faintly aware of her surroundings.

“Oh,” says Remus unhelpfully. “Well, she looks better.”

“Thanks,” Dorcas replies in her kurt voice. “Fuck you, James, for insisting on this.”

“Sorry.” Miserably, James rubs at his eyes until they hurt, trying not to look as Dorcas lowers Mary very gently into a

chair across the table, which wobbles under her weight; they're all sort of wonky.

Mary raises her head a bit, resting it back and bearing her neck, chin to the ceiling. She levels her half-lidded stare at James.

"Hi," she murmurs. "Missed you." And in what James will later class as one of the greater miracles of the war, she cracks a smile at him. A real, face-twisting smile.

James wants to hug her but doesn't. He wraps his ankles around hers under the table and smiles the most sincere smile he can muster.

"Hi," he echoes. "Missed you too."

"Feels nice to be human again," she remarks, neck twisting a bit as she los around. Evidently her movement is still extremely limited, but she seems able to take in the whole room with minimal discomfort.

Dorcas sits beside her, a protective jut to her jaw. "You're sure the ceiling of this place won't fall in?" she asks dubiously.

"I'm sure," Lily says, huffing as she falls back into her seat. "Is Sirius bringing the others?"

As if on cue, there's another bang outside. Moments later, Claude Archembeau is towering in their front door, ducking as they step inside. They've got this big, sure presence like thunder should reasonably crack every time they set a foot down. Every time James sees them, he remembers how they said, *get away from him*, and plunged a knife at the Dark Lord in Little Hangleton with no fear in their face or frame. Only vengeance like a biblical angel or something cooler. He

understands why Sirius wants to be so much like them. Or maybe he doesn't quite get it, James thinks, watching Sirius shuffle in behind Archembeau with Yí'ān slung across his shoulder, tufty hair pulled up out of his face, the way he holds himself different somehow now. Like his centre of gravity has shifted along with everything else about him. Maybe one of these days, James will figure it out.

Yí'ān himself seems mostly capable of holding himself up on his own. But can James honestly blame anybody for indulging Sirius Black? He would be hypocritical even to try.

They muddle their way into some semblance of an order. Yí'ān and Archembeau take one end of the table, Yí'ān's elbows on the table like a concerned parent, Archembeau with their arms folded like they couldn't give less of a shit. Mary and Dorcas sit together on one side of the table with Lily to their left, and James, Remus and Sirius crush onto two chairs together on the other side, James in the middle, half on Sirius' side and half on Remus' with their bony elbows in his ribs and Sirius' hair tickling his shoulder.

Yí'ān is the first to speak up. "Alright," he says tentatively, glancing around at their strange, dysfunctional gaggle. Fate must have it out for them to have put this many traumatised, dysfunctional teens into the same country, let alone the same room. "So, what's this about?"

"I started the Newhaven fire," James says. Rip off the bandage.

It's like someone's sucked all the air out of the room.

"Come out and fucking say it, then," Dorcas mutters, glowering at him.

“...Say that again?” Yí’ān requests, looking like he’s about five steps back in the conversation. He might as well still be in France.

“I started it.” James clears his throat. He half expects himself to start crying but there’s no burning behind his eyes, he doesn’t feel it rising in his throat. He doesn’t think he could cry right now even if he wanted to. It’s like his body has turned to stone. “The fire. It was me.”

There is a long stretch of quiet. James stares at the table, looking at none of them. He doesn’t want to see the looks of frustration, confusion. Anger. Blame. Disbelief. Hatred. Hatred. They hate him. They must hate him. Remus is going to leave him again; Remus is going to leave him. James knows it with a surety like stone. Remus is going to leave him.

“...Can you talk to us about why?” Yí’ān asks, very gently.

James is reminded all of a sudden of his parents for some reason. He isn’t sure why. It makes his throat constrict and suddenly he can’t speak. He can’t breathe. He says nothing; he can’t even shake his head.

There’s a longer quiet.

“Why?” asks Archembeau’s rumbling voice, far less kindly. It’s barely a question. It feels like it could split James apart at the atoms.

“Claude,” Sirius starts in a small voice.

“They’re right,” Lily says, though she doesn’t sound very sure of herself. “James, why?”

James manages to scrape his gaze up, up, to Dorcas' face. He tries to plead with her using only his eyes. *Please. Help me. Help me.* It feels like that night on the roof again.

Dorcas buries her face in her elbow and shouts out once, loud. Then, she raises it, blinking hard in the light. "I helped," she says. "I helped him do it. It was August. We were stupid. He wanted to destroy this... this ring."

Yí'ān and Sirius both startle at that.

"What?!" demands Sirius.

"Did it work?" asks Yí'ān.

"What ring?" Lily puts in.

"FUCK," shouts James to nobody in particular. He stands up, hands jittering violently, feeling like he might hit something.

Sirius grabs at his wrist, hands skittering across it.
"James...!"

James whirls around to face the table. "I thought I was doing the right thing!" he says, choked. "I thought— I thought— I tried. I tried to do something right. And I'm sorry. I'm sorry— I'm sorry about the letters, I'm sorry about the Order, and the war, I'm sorry about the fire, if I'd died in Little Hangleton it'd probably have been better—"

"James," Remus chokes out.

"This one's being hysterical," mutters Archembeau, shooting Yí'ān a pointed look, who rolls his eyes at them and kicks them under the table, saying something in Icelandic.

Face burning, sure he'll vomit with the shame and hurt of it, James turns around and stumbles from the room. His vision blackens at the edges and he's sure he'll pass out. He manages to find the front door and fumbles the door open, stepping into the dying daylight and hobbling like a beggar across the grass to the rocks, where he sinks like a stone among them, behind a particularly large boulder, out of view of the kitchen windows.

He shouldn't have done this. Shouldn't have said anything at all. It seemed like a good idea at the time, but so did the fire itself; James doesn't trust himself to make good decisions anymore, he doesn't even trust himself to make neutral ones. He's been one human bad decision for years. Someone needs to take his voice and his hands and his friends away from him before he uses them to destroy the whole fucking world or something.

Sirius and Remus don't follow him. There is little wind, and James thinks he hears shouting inside the shack, though he isn't certain. The walls are thin and the windows broken, but he could just as easily be imagining it. The sound of Sirius yelling. Remus' voice, quieter, lower. His boys. His. He wishes with animal fury, with hunger and bitterness and envy, for them to come out here and sit with him. He wants both of them to hug him at the same time. He wants it like nothing else in the world.

After some time, the sky begins to darken. Still nobody comes. James rests his legs out in front of him in the grass and weeds and he ruffles his hands through his hair over and over, compulsively. It's become something of a nervous tick since Kolka, since he started growing it out again. It never used to be but now he can't stop doing it. He picks five pimples on his face and his chin completely clean,

gouging pus out of them and flicking it from under his nails until he bleeds. The sky only grows darker still.

James has been outside in the cold for so long that he can taste salt on his lips from the sea mist by the time the front door opens. He hears it but does not turn around. There are footsteps in the grass. A single set.

Someone sits beside him, a few feet away, leaning against another rock. When James looks up, it's Yí'ān of all people. Mostly bandage, partially skin. One big human wound these days.

"Alright, kiddo?" Yí'ān greets, like James didn't just confess to what is probably a war crime.

James blinks at him. He can't help it. "Uh," he says. "No. No, I'm not."

"Guess that was a stupid question."

"It's not stupid." James looks from Yí'ān to the ocean again, not sure what to say to make this less awkward. He isn't sure he's meant to say anything at all. Maybe Yí'ān is here to sentence him or something. Or chuck him into the ocean.

"Well," says Yí'ān after a stretch of quiet. "You look like you need a hug. Do you want a hug? I won't if you don't want one."

James stares. "Excuse me?"

Yí'ān raises his hands. "Sorry," he says. "Didn't want to be pushy. I know some of you kids are iffy with touch and the like. I was for a bit when I first got to Reykjavik. Did Sirius ever tell you about that? Hell; I'm not sure I told Sirius

much. I was sixteen. Not much younger than you. And it freaked me out too.”

Without the faintest idea where this conversation is going, James blinks a few times. “I’m almost eighteen,” is all he can think to say.

“Oh, shit. Younger than Sirius?”

“Only by a few months.”

“I wouldn’t have guessed it.” Yí’ān sighs. “He still feels like a kid to me. Barely sixteen, stowaway washed up on our shore. I guess he’s not a kid anymore. Still plenty stowaway.”

“Listen,” James says, “please just cut to the chase. Please. I can’t take this.”

Yí’ān stares at him blankly. “The chase?”

“Just do it. Whatever you’re going to do. I’m ready. Just... let Dorcas off the hook for it, okay?” James stares down at his hands.

There’s a short, breathless laugh, high with disbelief. “Kid, James— Jamie, can I call you Jamie? No, okay. James. I’m not here to hurt you or anything. We don’t hurt kids.” And then, with more urgency, “We do *not* hurt kids.”

James sniffs. “I’m not a kid,” he replies, perhaps bitterly.

“Yes, you are,” Yí’ān replies. “Not taking argument on that. And even if you weren’t... that’s not how we do things.”

“But... Archembeau.”

A short sigh. “Claude, *elskan min*, is sometimes a little bit of a bastard. A big bit of a bastard. But they’re not going to hurt you. And if they did, Sirius would be upset, and I’m sure you’ve noticed that they are eager not to make Sirius upset under any circumstances.”

Rubbing his hand against the underside of his nose, James tucks his arms around his knees. He wants to make himself so small that nobody can find or see him, small enough to sink into the sands and be buried there. He doesn’t look up at Yí’ān, though he thinks it would be the most polite thing to do. He just doesn’t know that he has the strength.

“James,” murmurs Yí’ān. “We’re fixing this. Okay? Believe me on that. Please. We’re fixing this and you’re not on your own anymore. I promise.”

“I was never on my own,” James mutters. “Maybe if I had been, none of this would’ve happened.”

A shaky laugh. “That isn’t how this works.” One of Yí’ān’s hands lands on James’ shoulder and squeezes. “God, you are fucked up.”

James wants to be scooped into a dustpan or something. He rubs at his face, hands coming away a bit bloody in spots from picked pimples.

“Can I get a hug, please?” he asks, voice cracking.

“Of course. Come on.” Yí’ān stands up and offers James a hand. James takes it and he pulls him to his feet.

The world lurches and blackens around him. James blinks and Yí’ān’s still in front of him, still real. He’s got his arms half open.

“Uh,” James says awkwardly. “Okay. Uh.” And he steps into them.

Yí'ān gives good hugs for a virtual stranger. He pats James on the back with surety and firmness and James feels slightly less separate from his own body. It's not nearly as good as if Remus was there but it's better than nothing.

“You're really not going to—” he starts.

Yí'ān shakes him a bit. “No,” he says firmly. “We're not carting you off to Portofino for a trial. Nobody has to know. Not yet, anyway. Maybe not ever. And anyway, you're Sirius', which means by proxy you're ours. We won't let anything happen to you.”

He pats James' back one more time and lets go. James sways in the wind like the grass.

“I don't understand—” he starts.

“Come back inside with me?” Yí'ān asks.

“No. No, please, I can't. Not right now. I—”

“James.”

James swallows spit and fear. “Sorry,” he whispers.

“It's alright.” Yí'ān touches his arm. “Nobody's going to hurt you. Nobody's angry.”

“I'm not stupid.”

A pronounced wince. “Some people are angry,” Yí'ān corrects, “but there's no shouting. We're done shouting. Just... come with me, okay? It's cold out here.”

"I... I can't." James shuffles away. "I'm sorry. I just can't."

Yí'ān takes a long, tired breath. He's got very sad eyes and they stare right through James. "Son," he says, "I would very much just like to see you come away from the cliffs, for now. The rest, we can deal with later."

James hesitates. "Is Remus angry?" he asks quietly. Sirius he knows already; Sirius is almost never angry with him. He can't remember the last time Sirius blamed him for something, even when he deserved it.

Yí'ān shakes his head resolutely. "He's defending you," he explains, as if it's simple and should have been obvious. "Dying on that hill, that's for sure. He seems to love you a lot, aye? Now come on. Come on." He pats James' shoulder. "Come on."

James follows him back to the house, across the grass, through the wildflowers. Someone has lit it up inside. Sirius or maybe Archembeau. Lights float hazily past the windows, golden and orange and all faint, warm colours like fire through cigarette filter paper.

James tries to hesitate at the door. Yí'ān doesn't let him and ushers him inside gently, firmly, making it clear he doesn't have much of a choice here but to comply with this.

Sirius is the first to reach for him when he reenters the kitchen, though Remus isn't far behind. They pull him to sit between them again like twin walls at his sides. Someone takes one of James' hands; he isn't sure who. There are legs on either side of his legs. Someone is saying into his ear, *hey, I was worried*.

"I'm fine," mumbles James needlessly, hazy, out of place. He looks across at Lily and her green eyes are lancing a

reproach through him that is sharper than any knife. But the moment he meets them, they seem to soften until she's just shaking her head at him, back and forth, her teeth around her lips, a deep furrow between her upturned brows as if to say, you stupid boy. You stupid boy. I love you. I wish I didn't.

Archembeau's spinning their wand in their hand and doesn't look at him once, as if James isn't even there. The moment Yí'ān walks in behind him, they start speaking to him in rapid-fire French.

"They're talking about plans," murmurs Sirius into James' ear. "Ideas."

"On how to stop the fire?"

"On how to use it."

"Christ. No. Get rid of it." James takes Sirius' wrist and then lets go and corrects himself, "Can I—"

"Yes."

He takes it again and says, with more urgency, "Get rid of it. Please."

"Shh," Sirius murmurs. "They want to. They will. But it can destroy horcruxes."

"...Right." James shakes himself. He isn't sure when his mind got so scattered. "Right." He rests his head on Remus' shoulder, almost crying with the relief that comes with the feeling of that familiar fabric.

Remus puts an arm around him, fingers touching Sirius' arm and Sirius' arm touching them back. "You know," he

mumbles, "I'm never going to forgive myself for leaving."

"This isn't your fault, Remus," Lily snaps.

Remus shoots her a look; James feels his jaw tense against the top of his head. "Lily, don't."

Lily shakes her head. "Stupid," she mutters. She kicks James under the table once, so hard it really hurts, and then reaches across the table to hold his cheek in her hand. Just holds it. Doesn't do anything with it. James would let her do whatever she wanted but she doesn't.

There's a soft chiming sound, quiet but conspicuous; Remus and Sirius both startle on either side of him. James looks up; they all do, except Mary, who has dozed off, oblivious to all of this. James almost wishes he had been hit by the curse that night instead.

Yí'ān reaches into his jacket, seeming to ignore or not notice their surprise, and pulls out a small diary James remembers. Communications. Distress signals.

His brow visibly furrows. "Same ping," he mutters. "Further north, but still Poland. Crap."

Archembeau glances up at him. "No time for that," they say. "And you're sick. You can't go alone."

"Come with me?" Yí'ān offers.

They snort. "No chance. I need to get back to Nanterre—Portofino tonight, if possible. I will get them to tell me what they know on the fire's outer wall."

"You're not exactly in their good books right now," warns Yí'ān, rubbing his forehead.

Archembeau shrugs. "I am persuasive."

James doesn't know what it is that makes him say it. "I'll go with you," he offers.

"What?" asks Remus. "No. You're staying here."

"It won't be long. Just a bit. Just to check."

"Distress calls are dangerous," Sirius puts in, shaking his head.

James chews his lip. He desperately doesn't want Yí'ān to leave. And he desperately doesn't want to stay here, either. "Look, if they're calling for a second time, that means it's probably pretty urgent, right? We can just go look."

Without looking at him, Archembeau raises a sharp eyebrow to the ceiling and says, boredly, "You cannot unburn the fire by taking petty distress alerts, Potter."

"They're not petty," snaps Yí'ān. "This is important."

"Mér er alveg sama."

"Je m'inquiète," replies Yí'ān waspishly. "I care. Bugger. Look... James looks like he could do with the chance to step out for a second. You can come if you really want to."

"No!" both Sirius and Remus say, stumbling over each other to get it out first.

"Good," says James, feeling like he's crawling all over with bugs. And he knows even then that they will not like it, but they will let him.

Briest is cold as balls; the city sits on the horizon behind them like a cluster of fireflies in the gathering dusk. Yí'ān drops them onto a road and begins to limp. James limps beside him. They are like twin snapped matchsticks.

It's windier down here, further south, colder somehow. It has snowed and the thick, white blanket of it covers the ground in softened, crunchy sheets. Only just beginning to melt. The sky is clear. Clear as a bell. Grey ahead, yellow in patches, where the last dying sunlight stretches from the west.

"Injured too, are you?" Yí'ān asks him, breaking the silence. Their footsteps are the only other sound but for birds and the wind.

James pulls down the neckline of his sweatshirt, bearing the ridge beneath. "New War," he mutters. "Little Hangleton."

"Oh, shit." Yí'ān pauses. "I remember you there."

"I remember you. Mostly the taller one, though."

A sharp laugh. Yí'ān crunches over a pothole and stumbles, righting himself on his own. His balance must be way off with that head injury. James can only imagine what it must be like to have your head cleaved open and still be expected to stay a soldier. To keep fighting the next day.

"Yes, well, most remember them," he replies. "Hard to forget. Yeah, I remember both of you. You and the taff. Dewi Sant. I've gotten to know him and I still call him that in my head."

"I would've thought you'd like him better than me," James says. "Since he's Welsh. And you're Scottish. I'm, uh, rotten English bastard."

Yí'ān peers at him. "Third generation?"

"Second." James clears his throat. "My parents both moved to Britain when they were little, though. Didn't talk about it much. They're both from outside of Kaohsiung City. I didn't really grow up knowing much about it. British wizarding society is..."

"A lot of clones?" Yí'ān offers.

"A lot of snakes," James finishes.

"Well, you can say that again." Yí'ān nods at the ground, nods at the sky. Seems just to be nodding in general. "Do you still talk to them?"

"They're dead," says James stiffly.

"Oh." A pause. "I'm sorry."

"It's fine." James glances sidelong at Yí'ān. "I wish I'd asked them about that stuff. I've got no living family left now, 'cept Sirius and Remus and Lily, I guess. They count. But I still wish I'd said something."

"Of course they count." Yí'ān meets his gaze. "Once this shit is over, there'll be more, too. I promise. More people."

"Still."

"I know. It still sucks. I know."

James looks away, back towards the road ahead. He doesn't want to talk about anything else that'll make him upset tonight.

"How far was the ping?" he asks.

“Another hundred feet or so ahead, bit off to the left of the road.” Yí’ān clears his throat. “Stay behind me. Alright?”

“Okay.” James shudders. “These don’t usually go wrong, right? Or you wouldn’t have sent Sirius on one.”

“Sirius has experience with them going wrong,” Yí’ān quips. His posture doesn’t change. He still seems eternally relaxed as he always is. It occurs to James that that might be deliberate.

They carry on in silence. The sky above has a crack down the middle of like a stitch, long and dark. James isn’t sure what it is. A strange cloud formation or maybe the sky’s equivalent of a tectonic plate, splitting the earth into pieces above as well as below. Beyond it, like a bruise, like many overlaid bruises, the clouds move silently north. They morph little, holding a contiguous shape like fabric above.

James remembers, inexplicably — later, he will be unable to put his finger on why — the dark bruise on Sirius’ neck in second year. How it was almost black. How, like the clouds, it held its texture, silent. A warning. An omen.

“Crap,” mutters Yí’ān, coming to a sudden halt in the middle of the road. He points off into the snow, which lies unbroken for a mile to their left across a barren stretch of tundra.

There is a small shape lying in the ice. Dark and unmoving.

“That’s just a kid,” mutters James, squinting; he’s got a crack in one of the lenses of his glasses and it makes it sort of hard to see, but he’s sure that whatever it is, it’s not large. “Right? I think that’s just a kid.”

Yí'ān waves a hand at him to shut him up. He starts off across the road and slips off it, down the shallow decline into the wastes.

James follows, glancing around, paranoid. He's sure that any moment, something bad is going to happen. There is lightning somewhere, a nearby thunder; he hasn't seen or heard anything, but he can taste it on the air, static electric. Just waiting to strike out and carve open the earth.

The shape grows closer. It still doesn't move. Whoever it is, they're on their stomach. James thinks he can make out a dark coat flapping in the wind, half pinned under them, its ends wafted around by the oncoming storm.

Yí'ān jogs ahead of James and comes to his knees beside the collapsed stranger. With sure hands, he rolls them over.

James watches his face twist. He runs too, runs until he reaches his side.

And Yí'ān looks up at him, a very grim look on his face, and says, "Familiar, no?"

The passed-out stranger in the snow is frostbitten black all over his face, patches of it over his cheeks and his nose. He's completely colourless, just grey and white, dark hair full of ice. He might as well be dead. Maybe he is dead. He's in a fisherman's jacket, too thin for this weather, and he's got one of his arms twisted the wrong way and a bloody bandage wrapped around his thigh, pulled tight enough to cut off circulation.

How the fuck he could possibly still be alive, he has no clue.

"Well?" asks Yí'ān, though he seems to already know.

“Motherfucker,” says James. “That’s Regulus. Regulus Black. That’s Sirius’ brother.”

Chapter End Notes

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